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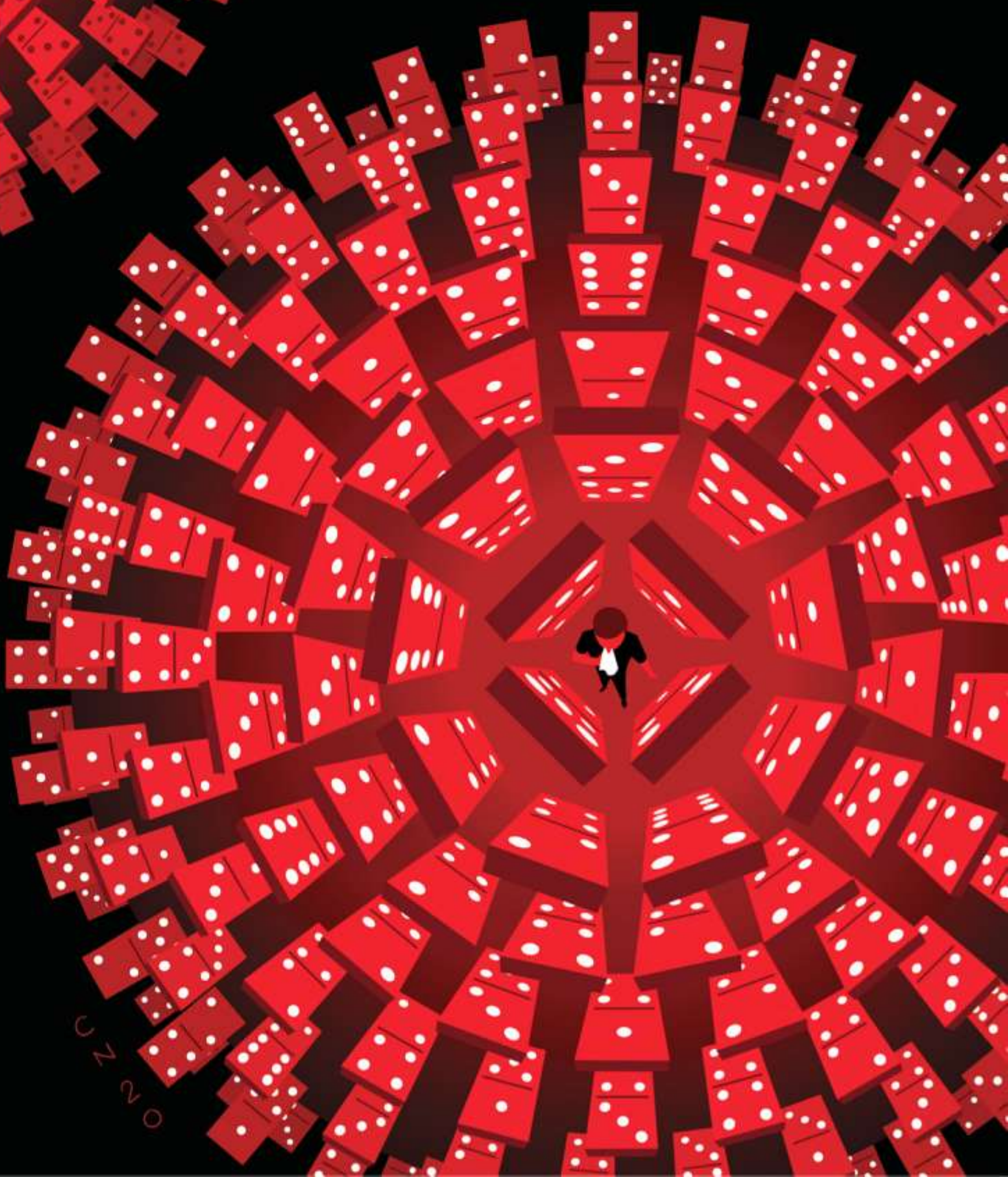

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THE NEW YORKER

MARCH 23, 2020

As a result of the coronavirus crisis and the closing of New York City venues, Goings On About Town will not appear this week.

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CONTRIBUTORS

Emily Nussbaum (*"Skin in the Game," p. 26*) won the Pulitzer Prize for criticism in 2016. She is the author of "I Like to Watch: Arguing My Way Through the TV Revolution."

James Somers (*"Cold War," p. 19*) is a writer and a programmer based in New York.

Geoff Dyer (*"Existential Inconvenience," p. 17*) most recently published "Broadsword Calling Danny Boy," which is about the film "Where Eagles Dare."

Kate Folk (*Fiction, p. 50*) is a Wallace Stegner Fellow in fiction at Stanford University.

Robert Pinsky (*Poem, p. 32*) edited the recent anthology "The Mind Has Cliffs of Fall." His latest poetry collection is "At the Foundling Hospital."

Atul Gawande (*Books, p. 59*) is a surgeon, a public-health researcher, and the C.E.O. of the health-care venture Haven. His books include "Being Mortal" and "The Checklist Manifesto."

Jon Lee Anderson (*"The Burnt Palace," p. 38*), a staff writer, is the author of several books, including "Che Guevara: A Revolutionary Life."

Jill Lepore (*"But Who's Counting?," p. 10*) is a professor of history at Harvard. Later this year, she will publish "If Then: How the Simulmatics Corporation Invented the Future."

Christoph Niemann (*Cover*) is the author of several books, including "Sunday Sketching," "Souvenir," and "Hopes and Dreams."

Kimiko Hahn (*Poem, p. 54*) teaches at Queens College, City University of New York. Her latest poetry collection is "Foreign Bodies."

Peter Arkle (*Sketchpad, p. 7*) is an illustrator based in New York. His most recent book, with Amy Goldwasser, is "All Black Cats Are Not Alike."

Alexandra Schwartz (*The Theatre, p. 64*), a theatre critic for the magazine, has been a staff writer since 2016.

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Helen Rosner on Hannah La Follette Ryan's photos of New York City's "subway hands."

NEWS DESK

Robert P. Baird on what it means to contain and mitigate the speed and scale of the coronavirus.

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LEFT: HANNAH LA FOLLETTE RYAN; RIGHT: JON HAN

THE MAIL

SEEKING JUSTICE

Reading Jennifer Gonnerman's heartbreaking account of Eric Smokes and David Warren's efforts to overturn their murder convictions brings to mind two concepts that I encounter often as an attorney working on wrongful convictions ("Burden of Proof," March 2nd). As agents of the justice system, we must always "get proximate" to our cases—a phrase coined by Bryan Stevenson, of "Just Mercy" fame, to describe the conscious act of becoming close to people and their experiences. To understand why two men would relive the trauma of their wrongful convictions and decades in prison, one needs to understand what they went through. Unfortunately, prosecutors and judges rarely spend time in prison speaking to people who have been robbed of their freedom. Perhaps if they had with Smokes and Warren, they would not have made or considered disingenuous arguments about the men's supposed financial incentive to seek exoneration. Nor would they have believed, based on the fact that Smokes and Warren accepted responsibility before the parole board, that the men's guilt was indisputable; maintaining innocence before the board would have almost certainly resulted in a denial of parole.

We must also be cognizant of how institutional bias affects our justice system. It will always be challenging for conviction-review units in district attorneys' offices to find, and speak publicly about, wrongdoing, but that does not mean that they lack the power or the motivation to try. Sadly, for Smokes and Warren, it seems that the review process was as flawed as the convictions themselves.

Elizabeth Sack Felber
Legal Aid Society
New York City

EXTREME RISK

Nick Paumgarten, in his piece about the thrills and grief associated with mountain climbing, features the work of the psychotherapist Tim Tate, who helped found the North Face's "wellness initiative" and has counselled its sponsored athletes ("The Altitude Sickness," March 2nd). North Face's president, Arne Arens, says that his company tries to make climbers' endeavors "as safe as possible." Through my recent research into the effects of corporate sponsorship on extreme-sport athletes, I have found that sponsor contracts often encourage athletes to take dangerous risks in exchange for financial rewards, because the granting of bonuses is tied to media popularity. Young, inexperienced athletes are particularly susceptible to the pressure to engage in "adventure pornography" on social media. Many sponsors—including the North Face—also don't provide athletes with health or life insurance, leaving them especially vulnerable when the worst occurs. Both Arens and Tate are thus players in a cynical game, in which sponsors contractually incentivize athletes to court disaster.

Horst Eidenmueller
Professor of Commercial Law
University of Oxford
Oxford, England

Paumgarten's insights into the allure of mountaineering align with my own experiences of hiking, climbing, and skiing in the mountains of Washington State. In the past thirty years, I've had three close calls: during a rockfall, in which I was nearly decapitated; while skiing over an ice cliff with a forty-foot drop onto bare rock; and while punching through a snow-and-ice cornice, two thousand feet above the Stuart Glacier. None of these experiences deterred me, however, because everyone who engages in risky sports makes peace with the possibility of death.

Ira Shelton
Edmonds, Wash.

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THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT
PRESIDENTS AND PANDEMICS

In late July, 2014, near Monrovia, Liberia, two Americans, Kent Brantly and Nancy Writebol, contracted Ebola. They had been working in a missionary hospital, trying to ameliorate an outbreak then racing across West Africa. The Obama Administration dispatched an air ambulance to carry them home, swathed in white protective gear, for treatment at Emory University Hospital, in Atlanta, and this touched off a media spectacle. The chyron story line was: Ebola comes to America. (Brantly and Writebol soon recovered.) Donald Trump, who was then less than a year away from announcing his run for the Presidency, weighed in on Twitter: "Stop the EBOLA patients from entering the U.S. . . . THE UNITED STATES HAS ENOUGH PROBLEMS!" He tweeted about the epidemic dozens of times during the next months, and called for a ban on travel from West Africa ("STOP THE FLIGHTS!"). The White House's Office of Digital Strategy later concluded that one of Trump's tweets, to the two and a half million followers he had at the time, was a "crystallizing moment" in the Ebola crisis, as Amy Pope, Obama's deputy homeland-security adviser, put it, and that Trump had "created a level of anxiety in the country."

He was just getting started, as we now know too well. Last Wednesday, the President sought to reassure the nation in a prime-time address from the Oval Office, as the COVID-19 outbreak was poised to morph from seriously worrying into the stuff of a bad Hollywood pitch: Italy a sixty-million-strong detention camp, the stock market in free fall, March Madness called off, Disneyland shuttered. The hope that Trump might someday grow into the dignity and gravity of his office was never realistic, but in this speech he put his narcissism and his reflexive nativism on exceptionally discordant display. "The virus will not have a chance against us," he said, promising that he had put in place "the most aggressive and comprehensive effort to confront a foreign virus in modern history"—as if diseases had nationalities. He declared that "testing and testing capabilities are expanding rapidly," only to be contradicted the next day by Anthony Fauci, the respected director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, who told a House hearing, "The system is really not geared to what we need right now. . . . It is a failing. Let's admit it." (Last week, South Korea, with less than a sixth of the population of the United States, administered at least ten thousand novel-coronavirus tests a day, while in this country, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, only some thirteen thousand tests had been administered since January.) On Wednesday, Trump advised the "vast majority" of Americans that the risk they faced was "very, very low." Fauci had already testified, however, that "it's going to get worse," and that, if the response proved to be inadequate, "many, many millions" could be affected.

Trump won the Presidency while pledging to wall America off from the world; the COVID-19 pandemic has reinforced his deep-seated belief in this impossibility. Quarantines and travel restrictions are a necessary part of a science-led approach to containing such outbreaks, because they can delay the spread of a dangerous virus, protecting hospitals from crippling surges of patients and buying time for researchers to develop treatments and vaccines. Trump often praises himself for his decision, announced on January 31st, to limit travel from China, a policy that public-health officials had recommended.

Yet travel limitations are only a part of what is necessary to manage a pandemic; coördinated action by governments is at least as important. Last week, Trump blamed the European Union for allowing the virus to spread on the Continent, and, as he announced a thirty-day ban on travel to the U.S. from European

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOÃO FAZENDA

countries (the United Kingdom and Ireland, among a few other countries, were excepted—a decision with no grounding in science), implied that he was defending the nation from the epidemiological equivalent of a European invasion. He reportedly did not consult the E.U. before announcing his restrictions, a churlish decision that will do nothing to ease European leaders' exasperation with him. On this, as on so much else in his foreign policy, Trump's needless provocations have undermined U.S. security; it is absurd to suggest that the United States can contain this pandemic behind its own borders without extensive help from allies in Europe, Asia, and Latin America.

On Thursday, Joe Biden gave a speech on the crisis that sounded like the start of his presumptive general-election campaign to unseat the President. "This virus laid bare the severe shortcomings of the current Administration," he said. "Public fears are being compounded by pervasive lack of trust in this President." Biden's victory over Bernie Sanders on Super Tuesday was one of the great Houdini acts of American politics, the result of his strong support among African-Americans as well as, evidently, the desperate desire of many Democrats to be rid of Trump by whatever means may be the most plausible. But, in the life cycle of a Presidential campaign, November is a very long way off, and the role of the present crisis in the election is no easier to predict than the trajectory of the pandemic itself. The promise of Biden's normalcy—his respect for science, knowledge of world affairs, capacity for gentleness and empathy, boring social-media feeds—will surely be enough for many voters, come what may. Yet it is unusual to win the White House simply by not being the man who currently occupies it.

In 2014, as a Twitter provocateur and fearmonger during the Ebola epidemic, Trump auditioned a political voice that he now exercises in full, to extraordinary effect. He presides over a social-media and talk-radio ecosystem that inspires intense devotion among his following, even as it spreads misinformation that will inevitably complicate the efforts of those who seek to navigate the pandemic by searching out reliable facts. On Friday, at a White House press conference, he declared a national emergency—"Two very big words"—a move that, he said, would free up fifty billion dollars to fight the outbreak in this country. He added, "I don't take responsibility at all" for the slow testing rate. The President is steering the country through a challenge of yet unknown magnitude, one in which honesty and accountability will be at a premium. We know that he will not change. One way to survive the pandemic may be to tune him out.

—Steve Coll

QUARANTINES DEPT.

COOPED UP

As millions of people in the United States begin self-quarantining, in order to prevent the spread of the new coronavirus, China, the first country to shut down, is in the process of opening back up. In Xi'an, the capital of Shaanxi Province, more than ten million people were placed under lockdown. When restrictions were eased, earlier this month, the city's divorce rate spiked. One official blamed it, in part, on the quarantine. "Many couples have been bound with each other at home for over a month, which evoked the underlying conflicts," he told the *Global Times*, a Chinese state-run tabloid. Perhaps global pandemic and marital strife go together; in the 2011 film "Contagion," Gwyneth Paltrow dies a horrible death from a virus after cheating on her dutiful husband, Matt Damon.

Lawrence Birnbach, a psychoanalyst who practices in Greenwich Village and in Westport, Connecticut, predicts that the divorce rate will also rise in the U.S. as the pandemic unfolds. (He co-wrote a book with his wife, called "How to Know If It's Time to Go.") Two of his patients are married, and are self-quarantining together, and both have reported trouble at home. "They've been arguing more than usual because one person doesn't take precautions exactly the way the other one wants them to," he explained. " 'You didn't wash your hands long enough. You took the subway. Don't you care about me?' " (Birnbach's wife had told him to stop touching doorknobs.)

Laura Wasser, a Los Angeles divorce attorney who inspired, in part, Laura Dern's character in "Marriage Story," weighed in: "A quarantine experience, particularly where there are underlying issues of resentment and poor communication, could be devastating to a marital relationship." She compared the situation to couples who, after enduring the forced togetherness of the holidays, seek divorce in January—a busy month for matrimonial lawyers.

Does every quarantine scenario have to resemble Hitchcock's "Lifeboat"? Might some couples grow closer? "That takes couples with real empathy," Birnbach said, adding that that quality was in short supply. Wasser was more optimistic. "It could be an excellent opportunity to reconnect with your spouse," she said, noting that, if a couple is on lockdown, it could reanimate their sex life.

How about some case studies? Katherine Codekas and Matt Smith, both fifty-seven, and both divorce lawyers, have been married for twenty-one years. In February, they were trapped together for two weeks in a not-large suite on board the Diamond Princess, the cruise ship that was quarantined in the port of Yokohama, Japan, following a coronavirus outbreak. "We got along famously," Codekas said. "There were no outside influences to argue about. No 'You gotta get groceries' or 'You gotta clean the litter box.' " She passed the time by watching "Say Yes to the Dress"—a show that she had never seen before, and which she called "completely mind-numbing." Smith spent his days on social media, trying to contact the outside world. Codekas's main tip for the quarantined: carve out a space of your own, away from your partner. "When Matt was on Skype, I went into the closet," she said. Think of it as a quarantine within a quarantine.

Tyler and Rachel Torres were one of the youngest couples on the Diamond Princess. Both twenty-four, they were on their honeymoon when they were forced into quarantine. Rachel cross-stitched a Christmas ornament; Tyler

SKETCHPAD BY PETER ARKLE

HEARD ON THE STREET

AVENUE C AT 3rd STREET

Well, I'm not going on any cruises. No way.

Well, hopefully by June it'll be over.

I don't think so.

So, the sanitation of all work areas—starting tonight.

14TH STREET AT 2nd AVENUE

24 ROLLS OF TOILET PAPER

3rd AVENUE AT 14TH STREET

Bro, we were meant to be going to Italy on May 22nd!

What happens if there's still a lockdown?

We'll go to France.

14th STREET EAST OF BROADWAY

BEING WORN ON UPTOWN A TRAIN

Be Aware!

TIMES SQUARE

Flash sale for "Harry Potter"! Twenty dollars for almost any seat!!

CORONAVIRUS! CORONAVIRUS!!

ANGRY BECAUSE A "FREE TIBET" PROTEST MARCH STOPPED HIM CROSSING THE STREET.

EVERYONE IGNORES HIM.

42nd STREET AT 7th AVENUE

I just don't want to take the subway at the moment.

You'll be OK.

6th AVENUE JUST SOUTH OF 42nd STREET

They sent my roommate home because someone in his office had it.

CAFÉ ON 40th STREET

The situation is not optimistic.

Think positive.

The virus is on EVERY continent, right?

5th AVENUE AT 39th STREET

I just don't WANT to!

Come on!!

AT THE ENTRANCE OF A STORE NEAR 23rd STREET AND 5th AVENUE

PART OF HER COAT

He flexed up his muscles and shoved me. So I told him he shouldn't touch me, as I have the CORONAVIRUS.

IN A CLOTHING STORE ON BROADWAY JUST BELOW BROOME STREET

CROSSING CANAL STREET AT BROADWAY

They say you have coronavirus if you hold your breath and it makes you start coughing.

ON PHONE

They say it's better to walk, so I'm going to walk all the way up there. It's only two miles.

NASSAU STREET (JUST AROUND THE CORNER FROM THE STOCK EXCHANGE)

tried to learn how to juggle. Mostly, they just talked. "Tyler lived through Katrina, and we had talked a little bit about that before, but not as in depth as we did during quarantine," Rachel said.

"We also joked about what it would look like to escape from quarantine," Tyler said.

Greg and Rose Yerex, a Canadian couple in their sixties, tested positive for the virus on the cruise, but they were asymptomatic. "We felt fine," Rose said. Still, they were put in quarantine and couldn't leave until they each produced two negative tests at least twenty-four hours apart. "We learned to talk to each other again," Greg said. "We've been married thirty-four years, and we'd drifted into some pretty serious bad habits." He went on, "Being put together for twenty-four hours a day for two weeks, we wound up learning a lot about each other's fears, hopes, and dreams."

Despite being cleared by the Canadian public-health agency, the Yerexes, who are now back home, in Port Dover, Ontario, have continued quarantining—voluntarily. "Greg and I decided that there's a lot of fear out in the community and that people would feel more comfortable if we quarantined for another fourteen days," Rose said. "We have an acre of property. We can go outside in the yard. We can wander around the house. It's pretty cushy."

—Tyler Foggatt

DEPT. OF REBOOTS
LEMMINGS, AGAIN

Is there anything more hopeful and cheery than a group of young musical-comedy types gathered for the first rehearsal of a new show? No, there isn't. But "hopeful" is also the word for investors trying to resurrect a once potent but now tarnished comedy brand, and these two forces collided recently in a downtown rehearsal space where a reboot of *National Lampoon's* fabled 1973 musical revue, "Lemmings," was getting on its feet, before a run at Joe's Pub.

It is fair to say that the *National Lampoon* transformed comedy in the nineteen-seventies—heady stuff for a magazine, even in print-friendlier days, although the movie "National Lampoon's Animal House" helped, too. It is also fair to say that the *Lampoon* has since bankrupted its credibility by having attached its name to a string of dumb, largely unseen sex comedies like "National Lampoon's Barely Legal" and "National Lampoon Presents Jake's Booty Call." Whether there is twelve million dollars' worth of equity left in the brand—that's what PalmStar Media paid in 2017 for the name and assets—remains an open question.

One of those nearly fifty-year-old assets is "Lemmings," remembered by comedy nerds for giving John Belushi, Chevy Chase, and Christopher Guest an early platform, two years before Belushi and Chase joined the first cast of "Saturday Night Live." The revue, which ran for ten months at the Village Gate, was a druggy burlesque of the Woodstock festival, rebilled as Woodshuck: Three Days of Love, Peace, and Death, with cutting impersonations of performers such as James Taylor, Joni Mitchell, Bob Dylan, and Joe Cocker. "Very, very good and very, very funny," Edith Oliver wrote in these pages. The evening ended with festival-goers committing mass suicide—a finale in tune with the Watergate era's souring on hippie idealism, and with the *Lampoon's* sense of itself as a fearless, smart-ass scourge.

But back to hopefulness: around a big table, the cast and creators of "Lemmings: 21st Century" gave a new script its first read-through. The reboot takes place at the "Downfall festival"—a stand-in for the likes of Coachella, Bonnaroo, Gov Ball, and the Fyre Festival. There are digs at influencers, glamping, Goop, Instagram culture, cancel culture, one-per-centers, long lines, and expensive festival cuisine, like "vegan hot dogs and vegan T-bones and vegan imitation crab / Plus real-fish sashimi that we grew in a lab." Among the performers parodied: Billie Eilish, Lizzo, Coldplay, Lil Nas X, Bob Dylan (again), Taylor Swift, "Ariana Venti," and "Florence and the Appliance." (Mercifully, a sketch involving "Justin Creeper" and "Carbi D" was cut.) Updating the original's gloomy finale for the climate-change era, the new show climaxes with a Category 5 hurricane. Plus Beyoncé.

It was hard to tell how the new "Lemmings" might play. Reached by phone, Chevy Chase was skeptical. "I think it's odd and silly," he said. " 'Lemmings' was so much for its time. To steal the name—if I did a movie tomorrow called 'And the Holy Grail,' it might make people come, but it doesn't fit the time."

At the reading, though, more jokes had landed than not. The writer, Andrew Farmer, and the songwriter, Henry Koperski, both in their thirties and with solid alternative-comedy credentials, asked the cast for notes. Eric Lockley, who plays a washed-up rapper, said he didn't get a line about the Hardy Boys, those now ninety-three-year-old teen detectives. "I had to look them up," he noted, and suggested subbing in Alex Mack or Shelby Woo, Nickelodeon sleuths from the nineties. On the other end of the cultural-temporal spectrum, a debate broke out over a reference to VSCO girls (a subspecies of teen that cropped up last year, characterized by a fondness for scrunchies).

During a break, Farmer explained the show's comedic philosophy, which aligns with the *National Lampoon's* newfound desire to find an intersection between outrageousness and wokeness. (The brand has been sponsoring standup evenings with themes like "Lesbian Agenda" and "Rape Jokes by Survivors.") Farmer detailed how he and Koperski had revamped the show's Ariana Grande number, which initially focussed on her dating habits. They worried that it was slut-shamey and, worse, tired. They also cut a bit poking fun at Kanye West. "Clearly, he's going through something," Farmer said. "And punching someone when they're down doesn't feel like the best joke at the moment."

That was not a scruple held by the mostly straight white male writers for the old *Lampoon*, much of whose work, where it involved women, minorities, and underage sex, has not aged well. Farmer heralded the new *Lampoon's* multiplicity of voices. "We're both gay," he said of himself and Koperski, "and I'm disabled." (He has clubfeet and a condition known as windswept hands.) "Being handed the mike to work with a comic institution like this and to be lampooning culture from a different perspective is a great way to change what people think about *National Lampoon*."

That change will have to wait. During

the script discussion, an actor had ventured, "This might be opening a can of worms, but should we be mentioning coronavirus?" The consensus was: wait and see. "Who knows?" Farmer said. "We may end up performing this thing under a plastic tent." The comment proved half prescient. Days later, it was decided to postpone the show until August. The real Coachella had already been pushed to October. Maybe there was a new joke to be made about natural disasters, or cancel culture.

—Bruce Handy

AT THE MUSEUMS

TECHNIQUE

Ten days before the Metropolitan Museum of Art closed its doors to the public, owing to concern over COVID-19, it celebrated an opening, or really a reopening, of its British Galleries, after a renovation that took more than a year. The space consists of ten rooms, including three lavish interiors that were imported from England and reassembled here. In the past, these had been easy to miss as you made your way from the wonders of medieval Europe to the armor and the American Wing.

Not long before the reopening, an artist named James Boyd was hanging around a broad stairway that had been transferred from Cassiobury, an estate in Hertfordshire. He was preparing to add some varnish to a wainscot. Throughout the renovation, he'd been working with the curators to bring eighteenth-century Britain to life; which is to say, he'd been painting murals and trompe-l'oeils by himself—twelve to fourteen hours a day, seven days a week, for sixteen months. "I'm total toast," he said. "But it was a real sabbatical for me."

What it was a sabbatical from was Boyd's regular work, with his longtime partner, Anne Reath, of decorative interior painting—murals, wall finishes, wallpaper friezes, stencilling, fabric design, *verre églomisé*—for wealthy clients, about whom he won't say much. Billionaires, Russians, Greenwich, the Hamptons, cycles of boom and bust. A lot of Boyd's clients are big into gilding. For one job, he'd conveyed, by bicycle, about fifty thousand dollars' worth of gold leaf, from a dealer downtown.

"These clients are like the people who built these extraordinary rooms," Boyd said, gesturing toward the stairway. This would make him more like the anonymous artisans who did all the extraordinary work. He is not a representative of the ruling class. Boyd, sixty-six, was reared in New Jersey but left "as soon as possible" to attend an experimental college (now defunct) in California. For a time, he lived on a boat on the Calaveras River, in an eccentric art commune/squat called Darrahville. He met Reath, and they found work in Los Angeles handpainting upholstery fabrics. "We painted on everything," Boyd said. "Anne had painted her shoes. One day, a woman saw her on Rodeo Drive. 'Where'd you get those shoes?' So we made fourteen thousand pairs of hand-painted espadrilles. We were clueless capitalists."

They earned enough to move to Florence for a few years. "That's when I first thought about traditional art," he said. In 1985, they settled in New York and studied with a master of classical painting named Michael Aviano. "He taught in the eighteenth-century style—structured palette, umber underpainting," Boyd said. "Here's thousands of years of technique passed down. Then we hit modernism and it's all thrown away. Pretty much any teacher who had technique has been dead for fifty years." They also became friendly with the interior designer Jed Johnson, Andy Warhol's lover. Johnson hired them to paint fabrics and wall surfaces. "We did whatever we were asked to do," Boyd said. "We learned more as we went along." For four decades, this has been their business. "Recently, it's been a bit more of a struggle," he said. "For forever, wealth's taste ran back to eighteenth-century France. And now it has changed dramatically."

James Boyd

On the Cassiobury staircase, Boyd had painted tromp-l'oeil wainscoting that mimicked the elaborately carved balustrade. He'd relied on a few old black-and-white photographs from Hertfordshire. "At first, Jim's version was just too good, far too realistic," Wolf Burchard, a curator, said. "It was competing with the balustrade."

For a nearby dining room taken from an estate in Oxfordshire, Boyd had painted three huge canvases—each seventeen feet by nine feet—depicting the Capability Brown-designed gardens as they would have looked in the eighteenth century (in late afternoon, in late summer). Boyd had mimicked the dusky shading that was popular in the landscape painting of the time. ("People went outside in tinted glasses, or with what they called a Claude glass, to make the landscapes appear as dark as they looked in Claude Lorrain's paintings from the century before," he said.) Each canvas was mounted behind a window, on a curving surface, to enhance the illusion that one was gazing outside.

In a third room, from a London estate, he'd painted murals of a view out of three large windows. As a reference, Boyd had studied eighteenth-century nightscapes by Abraham Pether. "Pether was the Thomas Kinkade of the time," Boyd said. "The curators were pleasantly surprised that I got into the scholarship so deeply." At the Met, he felt immersed in the exertions of his forebears. "There's a monastic chant murmuring through the place," he said. "Like voices in the forest." And yet, as an anonymous practitioner of esoteric methods, he also has an unromantic view of art: "It's more like mathematics mixed with physical labor." Walking out through the galleries, past teapots, gaudy majolica, and ceramic Wally Birds, Boyd said, "The people who made all this stuff—these are my folks."

—Nick Paumgarten

AMERICAN CHRONICLES

BUT WHO'S COUNTING?

The coming census.

BY JILL LEPORE

Like most institutions of democratic government, the census is under threat.

"Count all people, including babies," the U.S. Census Bureau instructs Americans on the questionnaire that will be mailed to every household by April 1, 2020, April Fool's Day, which also happens to be National Census Day (and has been since 1930). You can answer the door; you can answer by mail; for the first time, you can answer online.

People have been counting people for thousands of years. Count everyone, beginning with babies who have teeth, decreed census-takers in China in the first millennium B.C.E., under the Zhou dynasty. "Take ye the sum of all the congregation of the children of Israel, after their families, by the house of their fathers, with the number of their names, every male by their polls," God commands Moses in the Book of Numbers, describing a census, taken around 1500 B.C.E., that counted only men "twenty years old and upward, all that are able to go forth to war in Israel"—that is, potential conscripts.

Ancient rulers took censuses to measure and gather their strength: to muster armies and levy taxes. Who got counted depended on the purpose of the census. In the United States, which counts "the whole number of persons in each state," the chief purpose of the census is to apportion representation in Congress. In 2018, Secretary of Commerce Wilbur Ross sought to add a question to the 2020 U.S. census that would have read, "Is this person a citizen of the United States?" Ross is a banker who specialized in bankruptcy before joining the Trump Administration; earlier, he had handled cases involving the insolvency of Donald Trump's casinos. The Census Bureau objected to the question Ross proposed. Eighteen states, the District of Columbia, fifteen cities and counties, the United Conference of Mayors, and a coalition of non-governmental organizations filed a lawsuit, alleging that the question violated the Constitution.

Last year, United States District Court Judge Jesse Furman, in an opinion for the Southern District, found Ross's attempt to add the citizenship question to be not only unlawful, and quite possibly unconstitutional, but also, given the way Ross went about trying to get it added to the census, an abuse of power. Furman wrote, "To conclude otherwise and let Secretary Ross's decision stand would undermine the proposition—central to the rule of law—that ours is a 'government of laws, and not of men.'" There is, therefore, no citizenship question on the 2020 census.

All this, though, may be by the bye, because the census, like most other institutions of democratic government, is under threat. Google and Facebook, after all, know a lot more about you, and about the population of the United States, or any other state, than does the U.S. Census Bureau or any national census agency. This year may be the last time that a census is taken door by door, form by form, or even click by click.

Until ten thousand years ago, only about ten million men, women, and children lived on the entire planet, and any given person had only ever met a few dozen. (One theory holds that this is why some very old languages have no word for numbers.) No one could count any sizable group of people until human populations began to cluster together and to fall under the authority of powerful governments. Taking a census required administrative skills, coercive force, and fiscal resources, which is why the first reliable censuses were taken by Chinese emperors and Roman emperors, as the economist Andrew Whitby explains

ILLUSTRATION BY TIM PEACOCK

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in "The Sum of the People: How the Census Has Shaped Nations, from the Ancient World to the Modern Age."

Censuses abound in the Bible, including one ordered by the Roman emperor Caesar Augustus and overseen by Quirinius, the Roman governor of Syria. "And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed," according to the Gospel of Luke. "This census first took place while Quirinius was governing Syria." Everyone was supposed to register in the place of his or her birth. That, supposedly, was why Joseph made the journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, "to be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child." (Quirinius' census of Judea actually took place years later, but it's a good story.)

The first modern census—one that counted everyone, not just men of fighting age or taxpayers, and noted all their names and ages—dates to 1703, and was taken in Iceland, where astonishingly accurate census-takers counted 50,366 people. (They missed only one farm.) The modern census is a function of the modern state, and also of the scientific revolution. Modern demography began with the study of births and deaths recorded in parish registers and bills of mortality. The Englishman John Graunt, extrapolating from these records in the mid-seventeenth century, worked out the population of London, thereby founding the field that his contemporary William Petty called "political arithmetic." Another way to do this is to take a census. In 1753, Parliament considered a bill for "taking and registering an annual Account of the total number of people" in order to "ascertain the collective strength of the nation." This measure was almost single-handedly defeated by the parliamentarian William Thornton of York, who asked, "Can it be pretended, that by the knowledge of our number, or our wealth, either can be increased?" He argued that a census would reveal to England's enemies the very information England sought to conceal: the size and distribution of its population. Also, it violated liberty. "If any officer, by whatever authority, should demand of me an account of the number and circumstance of my family, I would refuse it," he announced.

Two years later, in Pennsylvania, Benjamin Franklin published "Observations Concerning the Increase of Mankind." Franklin had every reason to want to count the people in Britain's North American colonies. He calculated that they numbered about a million, roughly the population of Scotland, which had forty-five members in the House of Commons and sixteen peers in the House of Lords. How many had the Americans? None.

To make this matter of representation mathematical, enumeration of the people, every ten years, is mandated by the U.S. Constitution. There would be no more than one member of Congress for every thirty thousand people. The Constitution also mandates that any direct tax levied on the states must be proportional to population. The federal government hardly ever levies taxes directly, though. Instead, it's more likely to provide money and services to the states, and these, too, are almost always allocated in proportion to population. So the accuracy of the census has huge implications. Wilbur Ross's proposed citizenship question, which was expected to reduce the response rate in congressional districts with large numbers of immigrants, would have reduced the size of the congressional delegations from those districts, and choked off services to them.

Under the terms of the Constitution, everyone in the United States was to be counted, except "Indians not taxed" (a phrase that both excluded Native peoples from U.S. citizenship and served as a de-facto acknowledgment of the sovereignty of Native nations). Every person would be counted, and there were three kinds: "free persons"; persons "bound to service for a term of years"; and "all other persons," the last a sorry euphemism for enslaved people, who were to be counted as three-fifths of a free person. It was a compromise between Northern delegates (who didn't want to count them at all, to thwart the South from gaining additional seats in Congress) and Southern delegates (who wanted to count them, for the sake of those seats)—a compromise, that is, between zero and one.

It took six hundred and fifty census-takers eighteen months to enumerate the population in 1790. And then Americans went census-crazy. There were six questions on the first U.S. census. Then came questions that divided people into native-born and foreign-born. By 1840, when the questionnaires were printed, rather than written by hand, there were more than seventy questions. Other questions, like one about the ages of the enslaved population (lobbied for by abolitionists), were struck down. In the decades since, questions have been added and dropped. Most of them have involved sorting people into categories, especially by race. In the eighteen-forties, Southerners in Congress defeated proposals to record the names of people held in bondage and their place of birth. Had these proposals passed, the descendants of those Americans would be able to trace their ancestors far more easily, and the scholarship on the history of the African diaspora would be infinitely richer.

The 1850 census, the first conducted by a new entity known as the Census Board, was also the first to record individual-level rather than family data (except for enslaved people), the first to record an immigrant's country of birth, and the first to ask about "color," in column 6, a question that required particular instructions, as Paul Schor explains in "Counting Americans: How the U.S. Census Classified the Nation" (Oxford). "Under heading 6, entitled 'Color,' in all cases where the person is white, leave the space blank; in all cases where the person is black, insert the letter B; if mulatto, insert M. It is very desirable that these particulars be carefully regarded."

The federal government had all kinds of reasons for carefully regarding these particulars. In 1860, the Census Board added a new "color," for indigenous peoples who had become American citizens: the federal government wanted more information about a population that it sought to control. Although "Indians not taxed" were still not to be counted, "the families of Indians who have renounced tribal rule, and who under State or Territorial laws exercise the rights of citizens, are to be enumerated. In all such cases write 'Ind.' Opposite their names, in column 6, under heading 'Color.'" Americans designated as "Ind." could "exercise the rights of citizens" but were not, in 1860, deemed to be "white."

The government's interest in counting

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Indians grew during the era of westward expansion that followed the Civil War, leading to the establishment of an "Indian Division" of the census. The instructions grew elaborate as the government, pursuing remorseless military campaigns against Plains and Western Indians, sought to subject much of the Native population to U.S. rule by way of forced assimilation. The census became an extension of that policy, assimilation by classification: "Where persons reported as 'Half-breeds' are found residing with whites, adopting their habits of life and methods of industry, such persons are to be treated as belonging to the white population. Where, on the other hand, they are found in communities composed wholly or mainly of Indians, the opposite construction is taken."

After the Thirteenth Amendment abolished slavery—and, with it, the three-fifths clause and the distinction between "free persons," persons "bound in service," and "all other persons"—the Fourteenth Amendment guaranteed the equal protection of the laws to "any person" within the jurisdiction of the United States. In 1869, preparing for the first post-emancipation census, the Ohio Republican James A. Garfield, chair of the House Special Subcommittee on the Ninth Census, hoped to use the census to enforce the Fifteenth Amendment. He proposed adding a question, directed to all male adults, asking whether they were "citizens of the United States being twenty-one years of age, whose right to vote is denied or abridged on other grounds than rebellion or crime"; his idea was to use the results to reduce the congressional apportionment of Southern states that could be shown to have denied black men their right to vote. This measure was not adopted.

Garfield's committee did make some changes, including adding another "color" category, marking out people from China, or those descended from people from China, as Chinese when, before, they'd been "white." The 1870 census issued new instructions, abandoning the early *if white, leave blank:* "Color.—It must not be assumed that, where nothing is written in this column, 'White' is to be understood. The column is always to be filled." Soon, with the rise of the late-nineteenth-century cult of eugenics, "M" for "mulatto" disappeared for a time, and "color" became "color or race," as reflected in a new set of instructions: "Color or race. Write 'W' for white; 'B' for black (negro or negro descent); 'Ch' for Chinese; 'Jp' for Japanese; and 'In' for Indian, as the case may be." That provision created a body of data cited by advocates for the Chinese Exclusion Act, the first federal law restricting immigration, which was passed in 1881.

The rise and influence of eugenics was made possible by a growing capacity to count people by way of machines. The 1890 U.S. census, the first to ask about "race," was also the first to use the Hollerith Electric Tabulating Machine, which, turning every person into a punched card, sped up not only counting but also sorting, and cross-tabulation. (Herman Hollerith, the census analyst and M.I.T. professor who invented the machine, founded the company that later became I.B.M.)

For the 1910 census—a census accelerated by the latest calculating machines, and capable of still more elaborate tabulations and cross-tabulations—Congress debated adopting an even more extensive taxonomy for "color or race," a classification scheme initially devised by Edward F. McSweeney, the assistant commissioner of immigration for the Port of New York. On the passenger manifests for incoming ships, immigrants to the United States had by the eighteen-nineties been required to provide answers to a long list of questions, most of which were intended to predict the likely fate of the immigrant:

> The full name, age, and sex; whether married or single; the occupation; whether able to read or write; the nationality; the last residence; the seaport of landing; the final destination; whether having ticket through to such destination; who paid his passage; whether in possession of money; and if so, whether upward of $30; whether going to join a relative; and if so, his name and address; whether ever before in the United States; whether ever in prison or an almshouse; whether under contract to perform labor; and what is the immigrant's health, mentally and physically, and whether deformed or crippled.

McSweeney, who was appointed by Grover Cleveland, spent three days coming up with a different way to predict where an immigrant would settle, and how an immigrant would fare, by way of a shorthand for the immigrant's origins, a "List of Races and Peoples." McSweeney explained:

> This is not intended to be an ethnological classification. It is not intended as a history of the immigrant's antecedents but as a clew to what will be his immediate future after he had landed. It is merely a grouping together as far as it seems practicable to do so of people who maintain recognized communities in various parts of the country where they settle, who have the same aptitudes or industrial capacities or who are found here identified with certain occupations.

As Joel Perlmann points out, in "America Classifies the Immigrants: From Ellis Island to the 2020 Census" (Harvard), McSweeney conflated four then current ideas about divisions among humans: "race," "people," "stock," and "nationality." One of the "races" on his list was "Hebrews."

When Congress debated an amendment to the 1910 census bill that would have mandated using McSweeney's scheme, the strongest objection came from the American Jewish Committee in New York. "Their schedule of races is a purely arbitrary one and will not be supported by any modern anthropologists," the committee wrote to Senator Simon Guggenheim, of Colorado. "American citizens are American citizens and as such their racial and religious affiliations are nobody's business. There is no understanding of the meaning of the word 'race' which justifies the investigation which it is proposed the Census Bureau shall undertake." In the Senate, Guggenheim declared, "I was born in Philadelphia. Under this census bill they put me down as a Hebrew, not as an American." The amendment was defeated.

The color and racial taxonomies of the American census are no more absurd than the color and racial taxonomies of federal-government policy, because they have historically been an instrument of that policy. In 1924, the Indian Citizenship Act declared all Native peoples born in the United States to be citizens of the United States, and the federal government established the

U.S. Border Control. The 1930 census manifested concern with the possibility that Mexicans who had entered the United States illegally might try to pass as Indian. To defeat those attempts, the 1930 census introduced, as a race, the category of "Mexican." ("In order to obtain separated figures for this racial group, it has been decided that all persons born in Mexico, or having parents born in Mexico, who are definitely not white, Negro, Indian, Chinese, or Japanese, should be returned as Mexican.") Six years later, an edict issued by the Census Bureau (which had become a permanent office, under the Department of Commerce) reversed that ruling, effective with the 1940 census: "Mexicans are Whites and must be classified as 'White.' This order does not admit any further discussion, and must be followed to the letter." Mexicans, as a category, disappeared.

Censuses restructure the relationship between a people and their rulers. "Before the Nazis could set about destroying the Jewish race," Whitby writes, "they had to construct it." This they did by taking census in the nineteen-thirties. "We are recording the individual characteristics of every single member of the nation onto a little card," the head of an I.B.M. subsidiary in Germany explained, in 1934. Questions on the Nazi censuses of 1938 and 1939 were those the U.S. Congress had considered, and rejected, for Jews but had left intact for other "races and peoples": "Were or are any of the grandparents full-Jewish by race?" Then began the deportations, the movement of people from punch cards to boxcars.

Secretary of Commerce Wilbur Ross was born in 1937. He first appeared on a U.S. census in 1940, when he was two years old, a baby with teeth. On April 1, 1940, a Monday, a census-taker named Henry H. Brennan, employed by the Department of Commerce, counted the people on Fourth Avenue in North Bergen, New Jersey, by walking down the street and knocking on doors. His job was to "visit every house, building, tent, cabin, hut, or other place in which any person might live or stay, to insure that no person is omitted from the enumeration." Brennan reported that, on that day, two-year-old Wilbur Ross was living with his father, a lawyer, thirty-two; his mother, Agnes, twenty-seven; and an uncle named Joseph Cranwell, thirty-nine, at No. 1135. Their rented house stood near the corner of Seventy-ninth Street, about a block away from a baseball diamond.

The 1940 census asked a question about "color or race." Brennan listed everyone on little Wilbur Ross's stretch of Fourth Avenue as "white." The 1940 census also asked about place of birth. Ross, his parents, and Cranwell were all born in New Jersey. Most people on Ross's street were born in either New Jersey or New York, but about a third of them were born in another country. The 1940 census was the last U.S. census to ask about the citizenship of "everyone foreign born." Most of the people on Ross's street who had been born in other countries were U.S. citizens. The exceptions included, a few doors down, at 1132 Fourth Avenue, Arendt Herland, forty-three, born in Norway. Under the category "Citizenship of the foreign-born," Brennan listed Herland as "naturalized." Sophie Julus, born in Poland, a widow residing at 1145 Fourth Avenue with her American-born daughter and grandchildren, he listed as an "alien." Otto Schultz, fifty-two, and living at 1159 Fourth Avenue, was born in Germany. Brennan listed him as "having first papers." It is not clear whether the census-taker asked to see those papers.

Personal details recorded by census-takers are closed to the public—closed, even, to all government agencies except the Census Bureau itself—for a mandatory term of seventy-two years, an actuarial lifetime. Until then, individual-level answers are strictly confidential. But Wilbur Ross is so old—he is the oldest person ever to have been seated in a President's Cabinet—that his first census record is searchable. The 1940 U.S. census, the most recent that has been made available to the public, was released by the National Archives on April 2, 2012, right on schedule.

Nevertheless, long before that, the confidentiality of the 1940 census had

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been breached. In 1942, the Senate Judiciary Committee added Amendment S.2208 to a new War Powers Act. It authorized the Census Bureau to release individual-level information from the 1940 U.S. census to government agencies. That information was to be used chiefly by the Department of Justice, in implementing an executive order, signed by F.D.R., that mandated the "evacuation" of people living in the United States who were of Japanese descent, and their imprisonment in internment camps. The 1940 census, the New York *Times* reported, "now a secret under law, government officers believe, would be of material aid in mopping up those who had eluded the general evacuation orders."

The law didn't have to change. Instead, government officials simply violated it. William Lane Austin, a longtime head of the Census Bureau, had steadfastly resisted efforts to betray the confidentiality of individual-level records. But Lane retired in 1941, and his successor, James Clyde Capt, willingly complied.

There were no people born in Japan, or whose parents were born in Japan, living on Fourth Avenue in North Bergen, New Jersey, on April 1, 1940. Still, Otto Schultz, a German-born non-citizen, had plenty to worry about, as did other German aliens, and Italians, too. In 1942, the War Department considered proposals for the mass relocation of Italian and German aliens on the East Coast. In the end, F.D.R. dismissed Italians as "a lot of opera singers," and determined that the relocation of Germans and Italians—the two largest foreign-born populations in the United States—was simply impractical. (Even so, thousands of people of German and Italian ancestry were interned during the war.)

Ten years later, in the aftermath of Japanese incarceration, the Census Bureau and the National Archives together adopted the seventy-two-year rule, closing individual-level census records for the length of a lifetime, after which the National Archives "may disclose information contained in these records for use in legitimate historical, genealogical or other worth-while research, provided adequate precautions are taken to make sure that the information disclosed is not to be used to the detriment of any of the persons whose records are involved." Those precautions became moot when making the records available meant making them available online.

When Wilbur Ross directed the Census Bureau to add a citizenship question to the 2020 census, he said that he had made this decision in response to a request from the Justice Department. He was lying.

The Census Bureau does not like to add new questions. For every new question, the response rate falls. If the bureau's researchers do want to add a question, they try it out first, conducting a study that ordinarily takes about five years. (Among the bigger changes, in recent decades: since 1960, Americans have been able to self-report their race; since 1980, they have been asked whether they are "Spanish/Hispanic"; since 2000, they have been able to list more than one race.) In March, 2017, when Ross submitted a report to Congress listing the questions his department wanted on the 2020 census, he did not include a citizenship question. A year later, he sent a memo to the Census Bureau directing it to add that question, citing a December 12, 2017, letter from the Justice Department requesting the question for the purpose of enforcing the Voting Rights Act. The Census Bureau proposed alternative means by which whatever information the D.O.J. needed could be obtained, from existing data, and warned that adding the question to the census would reduce the response rate, especially from historically undercounted populations, which include recent immigrants. Ross rejected those alternatives.

Congress pressed him. Had "the president or anyone in the White House discussed with you or anyone on your team adding a citizenship question?" Representative Grace Meng asked, in a hearing before the House Appropriations Committee. "I am not aware of such," Ross answered. But, as Judge Furman documented in his opinion, discovery during the trial produced evidence that, long before the D.O.J. request, Ross had been discussing a citizenship question with Trump advisers, including Steve Bannon, who had asked "if he would be willing to speak to Kansas Secretary of State Kris Kobach's ideas about a possible citizenship question."

In June, 2019, the Supreme Court, upon reading Furman's opinion, affirmed his decision. Writing the majority, Chief Justice Roberts concluded that the Trump Administration's explanation for why it wanted to add the question "appears to have been contrived."

More than a hundred and fifty countries will undertake a census in 2020. After the first U.S. census, in 1790, fifty-four nations, including Argentina, in 1853, and Canada, in 1867, adopted requirements for a decennial census in their constitutions. Attempts to reliably estimate the population of the whole world began in earnest in 1911, with a count of the population of the British Empire. By 1964, censuses regularly counted ninety-five per cent of the world's population, producing tallies that led both to panics about overpopulation and to the funding of population-control organizations. The United Nations Population Division predicts a total world population of 7.8 billion by 2020.

Under current laws, your answers to the 2020 census cannot be seen by anyone outside the Census Bureau until April 2, 2092. But by then there is unlikely to be anything like a traditional census left. In 2020, the single largest counter of people is Facebook, which has 2.4 billion users, a population bigger than that of any nation. The 2020 census will cost the United States sixteen billion dollars. Census-taking is so expensive, and so antiquated, that the United Kingdom tried to cancel its 2021 census.

In the ancient world, rulers counted and collected information about people in order to make use of them, to extract their labor or their property. Facebook works the same way. "It was the great achievement of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century census-takers to break that nexus and persuade people—the public on one side and their colleagues in government on the other—that states could collect data on their citizens without using it against them," Whitby writes. It is among the tragedies of the past century that this trust has been betrayed. But it will be the error of the next if people agree to be counted by unregulated corporations, rather than by democratic governments. ♦

EXISTENTIAL INCONVENIENCE

Life in the shadow of coronavirus.

BY GEOFF DYER

ILLUSTRATION BY BRIAN REA

This might be the first installment of a rewrite of "A Journal of the Plague Year," but it will be written in real time rather than with the benefit of the fifty-odd years of hindsight that Daniel Defoe was able to draw on. If all goes well—or very badly—it might also be the last installment, because although we're only at the beginning of the coronavirus outbreak, I'm close to the end of my tether. Physical effects lie in the future, but the psychic toll is already huge—and wide-ranging. At the top end: Am I going to catch it? This can be answered with a slight rephrasing of Philip Larkin's famous line from "Aubade": most things may never happen; this one probably will. Strangely, that comes far down on the list of worries. Dying, that most worrisome thing, occupies less head space than the most minute things. Don't sweat the small stuff, runs the advice—and it's all small stuff. Except the small stuff—so small it's invisible—*is* the big stuff. See? We're getting in a right old tizz, so let's calm down and itemize our concerns, concerns about the virus which are also symptoms occasioned by it.

At the moment, the main concern is inconvenience. When trains or planes are delayed, the operators routinely "apologize for any inconvenience," as though inconvenience were just a minor thing, as opposed to an "existential threat," for example. But inconvenience is only inconvenient when it happens to other people; when it happens to you, it feels threatening. For most of us, our actual experience of terrorism, even at its most threatening, is of radical or habitual inconvenience. At present, this means asking ourselves if we will be able to go to X or Y and, if we go there, whether we will be able to get back. I can actually answer that quite easily. We're not going. We're not going to Indian Wells for the tennis, because it's been cancelled, and we're not going to Mexico, because we've cancelled, less owing to fears of catching the bug than to our desire to put an end to the are-we-or-aren't-we? angst. It was a huge weight off our minds when we jumped ship (a plane, actually) so that we could stay home and contemplate the implications of existential inconvenience.

The good news is that, for many of us, the virus might amount to nothing more inconvenient than the flu. As someone who hasn't caught even a cold in the past five years, the flu, until recently, seemed a dreadful prospect, but I'd settle for it in a heartbeat now. Book an appointment, put it in the diary, get it over with, and get over it! That's basically what happened last year. After I turned sixty, my doctor suggested that I get the latest shingles vaccine. As an Englishman living in America, I'm often suspicious whether a new medical product is a genuine breakthrough or just the latest hustle from Big Pharma. So I quizzed her about the side effects and the price. Maybe a sore arm, she said, and my health insurance would cover the full cost. "Deal," I said. "Let's do it!" As advertised, my arm hurt a bit (couldn't move it). I also went to bed feeling slightly under the weather. The next morning, I woke with a headache, a fever, and muscle aches that lasted for three days. It turns out that almost everyone I know who's had this shot has reacted the same way. And not only that—you also need a follow-up shot three months later, with similar results. So I scheduled that for a quiet week and, right on cue, went down with this flu-ey thing again, for just two days this time. It was both thoroughly unpleasant—though a lot less unpleasant than shingles—and really quite convenient. A two-week helping of something like that at the time of my choosing now sounds very appealing—*if* it would content itself with being just the flu. I'll be sixty-two in June, and I'm enjoying the perk of senior discounts while moving

deeper into the risk demographic of those susceptible to more-than-flu.

None of which seemed, a week ago, to concern the students at the university where I teach, in Los Angeles. They were blasé about the whole thing, understandably, since they're young and, it seems, permanently afflicted by the colds, coughs, and sniffles to which I have developed the immunity of age—which is not unrelated to the cunning of age. It required surprisingly little maneuvering to make sure that they were the ones opening doors so I could squeeze in or out behind them like a fare dodger at the gates on the London Tube. Colleagues were less easily duped. A friend who teaches Faulkner saw exactly what I was up to as I Englishly ushered him ahead ("Please, after you, Brian"), but he stepped up and reached for the bug-smeared door anyway. Naturally, *he* was up to something, too, and had taken measures to insure that "As I Lay Dying" remained a literary rather than literal experience. He was holding the door for me because he was also, in drug argot, holding. Hand sanitizer, that is. My wife and I hadn't stocked up on it because we wanted to be good citizens. Now we wish that we'd bought a couple of gallons, before panic buying emptied the shelves. (A terrible sight: Is *anything* more un-American than an empty shelf?) In "The Plague" (itself hard to find because of a sudden surge in what the students insist on calling relatability), Albert Camus writes that in times of pestilence we learn that there is more in men to admire than to despise. I want this to be true—to go back to Larkin again, I want our almost-instinct to be almost-true—but how does that square with people hoarding toilet paper and face masks in a city where, at the time of writing, there have been relatively few confirmed cases?

We've got just one little bottle of hand sanitizer, which, in another potential contradiction of Camus's claim, I've made clear that I deserve more than my wife because, frankly, I paid for it. "Strictly speaking, it's not *ours*," I pointed out. "It's mine." The soap in our apartment is still communal, though, so we're always jostling at the sink, bleaching our hands like the Macbeths. And what a minefield of anxiety the simple act of washing has become. Wash your hands every time you come in the house, they say. But, having got in and washed your hands, you then touch stuff you had with you in the viral swamp of the outdoors. And although we turned on the tap with a knuckle-nudge, those same knuckles were used to touch the keypad on our way into the apartment complex. Can flawed washing become a form of *spreading*? And how about the keys used to unlock our door? Should we be washing them as well? Once you become conscious of the tactile chain of potential infection, the ground rapidly gives way beneath your feet. We've now got a routine, have established a sort of cordon sanitaire, but how are we going to keep this up? Maybe we started too soon, especially since my hands are already rashy from the unprecedented orgy of scrubbing, soaping, and sanitizing. In spite of evidence of panic buying, it seemed that, in some ways, we were more freaked out by the bug than were other people here. Had they unconsciously absorbed the lunatic message of the nation's leader, that the virus will one day magically go away? Or was it part of that uplifting Californian mind-set that says one must never have—let alone express—negative feelings about anything?

I said at the outset that this account would unfold in real time, and, sure enough, the situation is constantly changing, and always for the worse. Certainly, the mood on campus shifted dramatically this week. Most doors have been propped open so that no one has to touch them. Until at least April 14th, all teaching will be done online using something called Zoom—yet another source of anxiety for older and technologically vulnerable faculty members such as myself. Who knows when we will return physically to classrooms? On the plus side, L.A., generally, is a far healthier city than New York or London. It's more spread out, and the worst thing about it—the relative lack of public transportation—might turn out to be one of the best things about it. On the minus side, I ride the Expo Line train all the time—another reason why I need the bottle of hand sanitizer more than my wife does. Besides, as a writer, I am uniquely at risk. Although it's a wretched life in some ways, I've always been heartened by the all-redeeming advantage of spending one's days writing at home: the freedom to pick one's nose whenever the urge takes hold—which is pretty much all the time. That's got to stop. But the writer's finger is vocationally programmed to go up the writer's nose. Even now, as I press these keys, a dangerous counter-gravity is urging hand toward face, nose, nostril. Keep typing, keep pounding the keys (which I'm touching now, seconds after sending a text to my tennis partner, on the very same phone that I checked while out having breakfast, *before* washing my hands when I got back).

Some changes are easier to make, though not necessarily more effective than others. My tennis partner and I have abandoned shaking hands at the end of a match—but, since I've touched the tennis balls that he has touched, what's the point? Also, like many men of my generation, I have a fondness for paying with that filthy, contaminated stuff called cash. (Speaking of which, does anyone, even in London, a city of proud and determined caners, still snort coke through shared banknotes?) I've got to start paying with a card, but, weirdly, America seems less contactless than the U.K.; you're always having to touch screens, trying quickly to choose the No Tip option while the barista is looking elsewhere. And why get anxious about screen touching when the cutlery has been touched, when you're drinking out of cups that have been handed to you by the hands of others? Especially when my wife points out that I'm holding the cup not by the aptly named handle but with my fingers round the cup itself in some residual affectation of or longing for the French style of drinking coffee out of a bowl, as if we were back in those idyllic times before every day was spent as both victim and suspect in the ongoing forensic investigation into this hand-to-mouth crime scene called life.

No wonder we're conflicted. I say two things to my wife all the time, one pitiful ("What will become of us?") and the other Churchillian: "Be of good cheer." It cheers one up, saying this, but while I'm saying it I am inwardly clutching my head like Munch's screamer. There he is, stranded in the midst of a blazing pandemic, gripped by the existential realization that shops are out of face masks and sanitizer and—this is the killer—that, while screaming, he's also touching his face. Aaargh! ♦

ANNALS OF NATURE

COLD WAR

Snow science against the avalanche.

BY JAMES SOMERS

We think of snow as a solid mass. In reality, it's a layer cake.

ILLUSTRATION BY THOMAS DANTHONY

One night earlier this winter, the only road out of Alta, Utah, was closed down. At ski lodges, signs warned guests to stay inside or face fines. Already that season, twenty-two feet of snow had fallen, and, the day before, a storm had dropped thirty-three inches; another foot was predicted by morning. The most dangerous time for avalanches is after a rapid snowfall, and three-quarters of the buildings in Alta are threatened by a known avalanche path. A standard measure for danger on roads, the Avalanche Hazard Index, computes risk according to the size and frequency of avalanches and the number of vehicles that are exposed to them. An A.H.I. of 10 is considered moderate; at 40, the road requires the attention of a full-time avalanche forecaster. State Highway 210, which runs down the mountain to Salt Lake City, if left unprotected, would have an A.H.I. of 1,045.

Just before 5 A.M., a small group of ski patrollers gathered at a base by the resort's main lift. Dave Richards, the head of Alta's avalanche program, sat in the control room. Maps and marked-up aerial photographs hung on the wall next to what looked like a large EKG—that season's snowfall, wind speeds, and temperature data plotted by hand. Clipboards on hooks were filled with accounts of past avalanches.

Forty and bearded, with tattoos on his arms, Richards has the bearing of a Special Forces soldier. He wore a vest with a radio strapped to it and held a tin of dipping tobacco, spitting occasionally into the garbage can beneath his desk. He objects when people say that he works in avalanche control; he prefers the term "mitigation." Sitting nearby was Jude, his English cream golden retriever, named for the patron saint of lost causes.

Jonathan Morgan, the lead avalanche forecaster for the day, described the snow. He wore a flat-brimmed cap and a hoodie. "Propagation propensity's a question mark," he said. "Not a lot of body in the slab. . . . Dry facets, two to three mils," he continued. "It's running the whole gamut of crystal types—wasn't ice, by any means. Rimy, small grains."

At ski resorts like Alta, large avalanches are avoided by setting off smaller ones with bombs. On the walls above the maps were dummy mortar rounds. Above Richards's desk were binders marked "Old Explosives Inventory." The idea, Morgan explained, was to "shoot the terrain we can't get to."

Richards started considering their targeting plan. The ski resort is cleared from the top down: first by artillery shells, then with hand charges. Before any shots are fired, paths leading to the mountains are closed. Because not all skiers keep to groomed trails—backcountry adventurers seek out remote areas—the Utah Department of Transportation also checks the roadside for tracks. Sometimes it scours the mountainside with infrared cameras before giving the all-clear.

"So we'll go fourteen for Baldy?" Richards said. "Doesn't include a shot seventeen." Baldy was one of the resort's mountain faces, at which they planned to fire fourteen shells; seventeen was a spot on its ridgeline.

"Seventeen wouldn't be the worst idea," Morgan concurred. "You got a seven in there?"

"When was Baldy shot last?" Richards asked. "Forty inches ago?"

"Yeah, Friday morning."

Richards and Morgan repaired to the mess hall—dark carpet, pool table, a deer head on the wall—for breakfast. At five-thirty, the ski lift opened. As Richards walked out the door, Liz Rocco,

another ski patroller, mentioned that she had prepared some of the hand charges they would be using that morning. "And I will light them, and throw them into the darkness," Richards said.

We rode the lift up in the moonlight. Snow was falling on the fir trees. Richards spent his childhood at Alta: his father was a ski patroller for thirty-three years, and his mother, who later became a university administrator, worked the front desk at the Rustler Lodge. Richards started his career as a professional skier, then worked as a heli-skiing guide, before joining the patrol full time. "The thing that makes it for me is the snow," he said. "Working with a natural material that can be—" He paused. "It's light and fluffy and soft and downy, and it's everybody's favorite thing in the world. It's also one of the most destructive forces in nature. Under the right conditions, that soft, wonderful little snowflake can tear forests out of the ground, throw cars through the air, flatten buildings. And you get to watch that."

At the top of the lift, we started hiking. A voice crackled over the radio. "Copy," Richards said. "Just give me a holler when you pull the trigger." A moment later, the radio crackled again; Richards ducked and covered his head, and an explosion went off somewhere nearby. We resumed hiking. After a few minutes, we arrived at a two-story shed. A garage door opened onto a pair of hundred-and-five-millimetre howitzer cannons, of Second World War vintage, installed on semicircular tracks. The gun barrels were pointed at the mountaintops. A crew was loading bags of gunpowder into the undersides of artillery shells—enormous bullets, six inches wide and two and a half feet long. Richards wrapped a rag around a large stick and jammed it into a gun barrel, to clean it. "One Sunday morning," he began singing to himself. "As I went walking . . ."

The patrollers donned foam earplugs and large over-ear headphones; Richards and his co-gunner walked around one of the weapons, checking locks and bolts. They turned a crank, and the barrel swung toward its first target.

"Zero, zero, two, seven," Richards yelled—the elevation and the deflection. Two other patrollers confirmed the coördinates. "Ready to fire," Richards said. "Fire!"

He pulled hard on a chain. The muzzle flashed, and a plume of acrid smoke filled the air. There was a high-pitched ringing.

It wasn't possible to see the mountain, but Richards listened for impact and, a few seconds later, yelled, "Report!" Outside, while the barrage continued, a patroller named Kyle took a small cast-booster explosive out of his pack: it resembled two cans of beans wired together with licorice, the cartoon version of a bomb. He pulled the fuse and tossed it underhand over the cliffside. "That didn't go where I wanted," he said. Ninety seconds later, it exploded into a black-and-white cloud of snow dust.

Afterward, the cleaning and stowing of the guns began. When everything was done, it was nearly nine o'clock. Richards prepared to ski back toward the base. During the night, the resort had sent an alert to Alta skiers, telling them to expect between nine and fourteen inches of new snow—some of the best skiing of the season. On the way down, the sun shone on fresh powder reaching up to Richards's waist. Small cracks shot out from his ski tips as he descended. Piles of snow slid downslope. He paused and, turning his ski pole upside down, began using it as a probe. The pole slid easily into the first foot of snow. Feeling resistance, he pushed harder—and broke through into a hollow. After the snow settled and drifted, there could be avalanches.

The project of avalanche control in the Alps goes back at least to 1397, in Andermatt, Switzerland, with a law that prohibited logging. Swiss peasants had moved farther into the mountains. Their new farmhouses sat in avalanche paths. It was soon discovered that old-growth trees anchored the snow and kept slides from gathering mass. During the eighteen-seventies, Johann Coaz, the head of the Swiss Forest Service, made records of historical avalanches. He drew up maps of potential disaster zones and designed walls to protect vulnerable settlements; the stones used to build them were hauled up the mountainsides by hundreds of men.

Around the same time, prospectors in the western United States began finding silver ore high in the mountains. At Alta, which began as a major silver camp, miners logged the alpine forests for firewood and to reinforce their tunnels. According to legend, the avalanche danger grew so high that women weren't allowed to live there in winter. Alta was abandoned in 1927, when the price of silver plummeted, but, in the nineteen-thirties, European-style ski resorts spread across the American West. The first mechanical lift appeared in Alta in 1939.

After the Second World War, some veterans of the U.S. 10th Mountain Division, who had trained for alpine combat, found themselves responsible for snow safety at the resorts. In 1945, Montgomery Atwater, a freelance writer who had fought with the 10th, heard about a snow-ranger job at Alta and applied on a whim. "That Alta was ideally conceived by nature to become the first avalanche research center on this continent and that I was there to take the plunge were mere coincidences," he later wrote, in "The Avalanche Hunters," from 1968.

Alta lies at the center of three storm tracks, from Canada, the Gulf of Alaska, and the Pacific. Storm systems accumulate moisture in the Salt Lake and, as they rise into the mountains, release about forty-five feet of snow each winter. Atwater learned that although snow always begins the same way—with a water droplet condensing around a dust mote or pollen to form a six-pointed snowflake—it can take innumerable forms later. Snow acts like both a solid and a liquid: it flows—even a blanket of snow on a hillside is slowly creeping—while maintaining its structure. Scientists consider it to be "warm," because it is always close to its melting point. This is why, before you make your first snowball of the day, it is hard to know how well it will pack: you are working with a material that is about to change state. It's like building a bridge with red-hot steel.

We think of the snow on a mountain as a solid mass. In reality, it is a layer cake created by serial snowfalls, each layer distinctive and changeable. "The snow cover is never in a state of repose,"

Atwater wrote. "It is continually being pushed, pulled, pressed, bent, warmed, chilled, ventilated, churned." The topmost layer might be evaporating into the night air; at the same time, radiant heat from the ground, or from nearby trees, could be melting the lowest layer. When the temperature differences between the layers are small, snow tends to sinter, or coalesce: the crystals knock off one another's arms, becoming rounded grains that fuse into a strong, dense snowpack. When the differences are larger—say, between the pack and the ground—snow vaporizes upward and refreezes, creating hollow, cup-shaped crystals. The result is brittle, spiky snow, called depth hoar. (In ice cream, a similar process creates freezer burn.)

Neither settled snow nor weak hoar is dangerous in itself. The problem arises when a dense layer lies atop a weak layer to which it is poorly bonded. Depth hoar is "the eeriest stuff on any mountain," Atwater wrote; it grows unseen, rotting the snow until it is weak and potted. It is strong in compression but weak in shear. Like a row of champagne glasses slowly loaded with bricks, it can hold a surprising amount of weight until, with the slightest shove, the structure falls apart, creating a slab avalanche.

The word "avalanche" is too graceful for the phenomenon it describes. On slopes shallow enough to accumulate snow but steep enough for it to be unstable—the sweet spot is said to be thirty-nine degrees—the layers will separate, and the slab will crack and slide. Churning violently, the snow reaches eighty miles per hour within a few seconds. A skier who avoids colliding with trees and rocks is likely to be pulled under, then pinned in place by thousands of pounds of snow that harden like concrete. Very few people can dig themselves out; most can't even move their fingers. Within minutes, an ice mask forms around your face. You asphyxiate on your own exhaled carbon dioxide.

In his book "Staying Alive in Avalanche Terrain," from 2008, Bruce Tremper, the former director of Utah's Avalanche Center, offers a taxonomy of avalanches. In slab avalanches—the most dangerous kind—an entire layer releases at once. In storm slabs or wind slabs, the releasing layer falls from above; in wet slabs, a layer lower down is weakened by water; in a persistent slab, it was weak to begin with. A soft slab, composed of powdery snow, tends to break where you stand; a hard slab breaks above you, which is more perilous. Non-slab avalanches are said to be "loose." In a dry loose avalanche, powder releases in disconnected sloughs. Wet loose avalanches—portended by "pinwheels," small snowballs that leave streaks as they roll—are slower but stickier, and more likely to bury you if you get caught. Mixed avalanches, which start dry and get wet lower on the slope, have become increasingly common. So have glide avalanches, caused by meltwater seeping in below the snowpack.

Students of tsunamis or volcanoes must wait for nature to deliver their disasters, but an avalanche can be provoked. In the nineteen-fifties, Atwater used a technique now called "ski-cutting." Two patrollers descended dangerous slopes; while one looked on, ready to stage a rescue, the other skied to a safe point on the far side, picking up enough speed to try and ride through any avalanches he might start. In theory, the slopes that slid were safer because of it; the ones that didn't were deemed stable enough for everyone else.

It wasn't practical to ski-cut every hill. Knowing that the Swiss used bombs to combat avalanches, Atwater tapped the Forest Service's wartime supply of tetrytol, the high-powered explosive; he asked his supervisor whether he could have some artillery, for distant targets. National Guardsmen arrived with a First World War-era French 75. ("What would avalanche research be without war surplus?" he later wrote.) For mid-range targets, too close for artillery but too distant for hiking or skiing, Atwater tried rifle grenades, bazookas, bombs dropped from helicopters, and an air-to-air rocket known as the Mighty Mouse. These methods were too costly, or unsuited to the snow; in the end, a modified ball machine, of the sort used for batting practice, was the most reliable delivery mechanism. Richards's team still uses Atwater's "Avalauncher" to shoot about thirty rounds each morning.

Atwater worked with Ed LaChapelle, who had done a stint at the Swiss Avalanche Institute, to create a "snow study plot"—a clearing where they could measure snowfall and take samples of the snowpack at regular intervals. They tracked the snow's rate of accumulation and weight in water, discovering that weight mattered far more than depth: when placed atop a layer of hoar, a foot of fluffy powder was less dangerous than three inches of dense slush. Wind, they learned, could deposit many feet in just a few hours; pillows of windblown snow looked tranquil but were deadly. Studying how snow settled, Atwater wrote, "We saw things going on within that

"Open up for the cleaning crew."

placid-appearing mass which no man had seen before—or even suspected." He concluded, "There are apparently random plastic flows and currents within the snow cover whose causes and effects were unknown, and still are."

In 1805, the Irish hydrographer Sir Francis Beaufort developed a scale for measuring wind speed at sea by observation. Later, it was adapted for use on land. In his book "Defining the Wind," from 2004, Scott Huler argues that the descriptions accompanying the scale, which were written anonymously, should count as literature. At Beaufort 0, the wind is "calm; smoke rises vertically." At Beaufort 3, a gentle breeze, one sees "leaves and small twigs in constant motion." At Beaufort 5, a fresh breeze, "small trees in leaf begin to sway; crested wavelets form on inland waters." The poetic descriptions connect subjective impressions to objective reality. A near-gale—a Beaufort 7—is defined by "whole trees in motion; inconvenience in walking against wind." See and feel those things, and you know that the wind is between thirty-two and thirty-eight miles per hour.

Atwater devised an analogous guide to snow. His language is evocative, but there's less authority in the descriptions. "Unstable damp snow is tacky," he wrote. "It slithers out from underfoot and rolls away in balls or slips blanketwise. . . . Well settled snow has good flotation and makes a clean, sharp track." Snow is less forthcoming than the wind. Its chaos hides beneath the surface.

One crisp, bright morning in February, I walked along a brook just outside the center of Davos, toward the headquarters of the Swiss Institute for Snow and Avalanche Research. In Davos, the train from the valley potters up through wooded hills, picking up locals in ski boots; the S.L.F., as the institute is now known, occupies a squat building a few minutes from the train station. A small exhibit in the lobby explains the history of snow and avalanches in Switzerland.

In 1951, while Atwater was experimenting with explosives, Switzerland experienced the worst avalanche season in its recorded history. Ten feet of snow fell in ten days. About a hundred people were killed; villages that had survived avalanches for centuries were destroyed. The S.L.F., which was founded in 1942, suddenly became an institution of national import.

Henning Löwe, the forty-six-year-old head of the institute's Cold Lab, wears an earring in his right ear; before taking up the study of snow, he received a Ph.D. in theoretical condensed-matter physics. Dressed in jeans, black Nikes, and a worn fleece shirt, he led me inside the lab, where computers sat beside refrigerated rooms with three-inch-thick steel doors. The lab's goal, he explained, was to find out what the wetness or heaviness or hoariness of snow really meant, on the level of its crystals. "We are connecting physical properties of snow to structure," Löwe said. He picked up a palm-size cube that looked elaborately hollowed out, like a plaster mold of a termite's nest. A twenty-millimetre-wide sample of snow had been taken from the crown of an avalanche—the pit that's left when a slab releases—scanned with X-rays, and then 3-D-printed in plastic, at high magnification: the layer cake, under a microscope. The weak, bottom layer was composed of what looked like large popcorn kernels. The top layer, which had settled, was a tight tangle, like instant ramen. "You start to shear this thing"—Löwe made a chopping motion where the two layers met—"it's ninety-nine per cent sure that this will break there."

Snow science has come a long way since Atwater's experiments at Alta. The basic process by which newly fallen snow crystals sinter into a cohesive slab can now be seen in slow motion: it resembles the way ice cubes in an empty glass fuse together. The process of recrystallization—the re-separating of the cubes—was more mysterious. Löwe opened a closet, and pulled a cylinder from a shelf marked "Snowbreeder 3." The device allows scientists to observe a snow sample while applying varying degrees of heat and pressure. At his computer, Löwe played a time-lapse video of "snow metamorphism" in the Snowbreeder. "In the beginning, it's typical snow, it's round-grained snow, the crystals are small," he said. Then heat was applied from below. The lower crystals began evaporating their moisture to the crystals above, which used it to grow downward. "We see that, here, a facet's growing. There, a facet's growing," he said, pointing. This was hoar—the snow becoming spiky, brittle, weak. "Seeing something is always the beginning of understanding," he said.

The scientific study of snow layers has refined our understanding of avalanches. In 2008, a study published in *Science* by a group of Scottish and German materials researchers modelled how, when one part of a heavy layer of snow collapses onto a weak layer, it can produce a wave. Their model explained a curious observation from the field: skiers occasionally trigger deadly avalanches above or below them, even when standing on flat slopes. The weak layer, it turns out, behaves like the coils in a mattress: apply force in one place, and it spreads all over the bed. The concept is now a cornerstone of avalanche-safety education, where it is known simply as "remote triggering."

Snow research also has applications beyond avalanches. Spinning his keys around a finger, Löwe led me through the cold rooms. In one, a humidifier generated tiny clouds of perfect, lab-grown powder; in another, snow from the Arctic, Finland, and Iceland had been carefully preserved. Scientists are studying how snow's crystal structure determines its color, or "albedo," which, in turn, affects its ability to act like a giant mirror and mitigate global warming.

In an upstairs office with mountain views, Perry Bartelt, a gray-haired research engineer, works on Rapid Mass Movement Simulation, or RAMMS—software for simulating avalanches. The week before, an avalanche in Turkey had killed half a dozen people; dozens more died during the rescue, when the mountain avalanched a second time. Turkish researchers had rushed data from both slides to Bartelt. RAMMS calculated that the first avalanche had hit the bottom of the slope with five times the force needed to knock down a building. Its core had the density of wood.

Using a terrain map, RAMMS predicts the path and the power of an avalanche. Its central innovation is its ability to treat an avalanche as a "granular shear flow," using statistics to average out the activity of millions of interacting grains. Imagine a box of cereal, full of flakes and marshmallows; now pour it out. Some bits will fly straight, carried by their own momentum. Others will catch on the surface they're sliding down. Many flakes will shake against one another, breaking up and settling below the intact marshmallows. (In granular flows, small things

sink beneath bigger ones.) RAMMS seeks to predict the outcome of this churn.

The software was validated on historical avalanches—especially on data about whether trees had been knocked down, and, if so, how old they were. "Trees are wonderful mechanical sensors," Bartelt said. If an avalanche takes down a seventy-year-old stand of trees, you know that the avalanche has a return period of at least seventy years. Fine-tuning the model would require more precise data, which are hard to come by. Gathering this information would require taking readings inside, or under, an avalanche.

For this purpose, the S.L.F. maintains an avalanche test site in the Vallée de la Sionne—a steep, mountainous area about two hundred miles from Davos. Hearing the phrase "test site," one might imagine a bunny slope. Actually, it is an enormous mountain, improbably reserved for science.

The site's chief scientist is Betty Sovilla, a hydraulics engineer. When we met at S.L.F., she was wearing red-framed glasses, a black cardigan, jeans, and red boots. "RAMMS is a very simplified model," she said. The goal of the test site was to develop a more realistic version, by correlating detailed measurements of the snow cover with the avalanches it created. She was particularly interested in glide avalanches: there were more of them every year, but they were elusive. "You cannot predict when they are released," she said. "This is really the avalanche of the future."

One morning, Pierre Huguenin, a forty-nine-year-old mountaineer and snow scientist, drove me to the site in a white Mitsubishi Pajero. "You see the flakes. You see the crystals," he said, gesturing out the window. There had been a storm the previous night. He stopped the car where the road ended, and we changed into snowshoes.

Outside, there was about a foot of pristine powder. I stooped and ran my hand through it. Bone-dry, it was the pure bright white of confectioner's sugar, with the texture of sea salt. Huguenin pulled out his phone. The avalanche forecast for the area had us covered in orange. "We are in the third degree," he said—the risk category in which the most avalanche deaths occur in the Alps, equivalent to the American "considerable."

"If they turned off when you clapped, they probably weren't the northern lights."

• •

He pulled out two avalanche beacons—transmitters that would relay our location to rescuers—and set them to Send. We strapped them under our jackets.

"My job before working at the S.L.F. was at a salmon plant," Huguenin said, as we set out. (He was an engineer there.) "It was so loud." Now we could hear the river as we walked. Beneath the blue sky, ours were the only tracks. After twenty minutes, the site came into view: a broad, bare mountainside, eight thousand feet high. Between two couloirs—the main avalanche paths—a half-dozen chalets huddled near a small wood.

"They are not allowed to live here in the winter," Huguenin said. Two days earlier, there had been a naturally occurring glide avalanche at the site. I asked whether it had been dangerous. "You would be dead," he said. "No chance."

The site was built in 1997; in the winter of 1999, the snow was the heaviest it had been since 1951—perfect conditions for an experiment. Using explosives dropped from a helicopter, the S.L.F. triggered three avalanches in the course of a month. They were so massive that they destroyed most of the institute's equipment. If you had been skiing on the mountain during the last avalanche, you might have heard a soft exhalation: air releasing from a crack in the slab. Upslope, it would have looked as though someone had slit the mountain's forehead. Now its face was falling off; the break, nine football fields across, was as deep as eleven feet in places. Blocks of snow would begin leaping up prettily, breaking like roiling water. In the quiet, you might feel something lapping at the back of your legs before being swept off your feet.

The slide generated a powder cloud nearly two hundred feet high. It seemed to move in slow motion, like dry ice billowing, but it levelled the trees. Underneath, the core was formed by four hundred thousand tons of snow. Huguenin asked me to visualize the test peak, two kilometres distant, and the peak of the mountain on which we stood as the two sides of a half-pipe. With a deep roar, he said, the avalanche had run through the valley like a skateboarder, with enough speed to climb the other side.

"It came all the way up there?" I asked, pointing to the top of our peak, three hours' hike away.

"Yup, and there is a trail there. One of the wards was on it. The guy at that time saw a huge amount of snow jumping the top here"—he motioned toward the ridgeline above us—"and falling on the other side." As the snow poured over

the ridge, the warden could hear tree trunks snapping like matchsticks. "He really thought he was going to die," Huguenin said. The experiment, which destroyed much of the forest, didn't go over well with the locals.

Huguenin and I continued walking. To our left, a Soviet-looking bunker poked out of the hill. It was two stories tall; in the 1999 experiment, it had been covered by thirteen feet of snow. To reach the observers buried inside, a crew had to cut a vertical tunnel with a chainsaw. Near the bunker, an array of continuous-wave radar antennas, designed to measure the flow at the avalanche's core, craned toward the peak. Huguenin pointed to "obstacles" on the slope—pressure and velocity sensors mounted on concrete-and-steel structures. Against the mountainside, the largest obstacle, a sixty-foot-tall pylon studded with flow-measurement devices, looked like a toothpick.

Avalanche country is like bear country. The threat hardly ever comes, but it defines the place, and lends it its grandeur. Outside the bunker, the mountains rose around us; flat clouds gathered in a distant valley like steam. We had lunch: bread, cheese, chocolate. The snow was warming in the sun. Scooping it up, I found that, instead of seeping through my fingers, it now formed a perfect snowball—metamorphism within a matter of hours. I thought of how plants observed in time lapse seem to move with animal purpose. I imagined the crystals in this newly fallen snow sintering and crackling with life.

From where we were sitting, we could see the glide avalanche from two days earlier. It was hard to get a sense of scale. Huguenin handed me his binoculars. Through them, I saw chest-high boulders of snow. Without them, the avalanche was a scratch on the mountainside.

One is unlikely to encounter an avalanche on the bomb-cleared trails of a ski resort like Alta. Avalanche accidents happen far more often in the backcountry, where skiers search for what the First Nations author Richard Wagamese called "the great white sanctity of winter." In a recent survey, more than half of backcountry skiers said they had triggered an avalanche; a quarter said they'd got caught in one. It's telling that the standard kit separating them from resort vacationers consists of a beacon, a probe, and a shovel.

I grew up skiing at small mountains in the Laurentians, just north of Montreal. Well groomed and popular, they were often scraped to ice. It was only a few years ago that I went with a friend to a large ski resort in Colorado. One day, we travelled to a remote part of the mountain. There had been fresh snow that morning, and I whooped as I dropped in, not another soul in sight. The snow felt like a cloud underfoot; falling evoked the childhood joy of jumping in leaves. Carving slow curves, I recognized the feeling of discovery: I was writing my name on the mountain. I also understood, for the first time, how powder and silence lure skiers into the backcountry.

To some extent, backcountry skiers can rely on avalanche forecasts. At the Utah Avalanche Center (motto: "Keeping You on Top"), forecasters make daily field observations ("+" means fresh snow; "•," round grains; "Λ," depth hoar), integrating them into uncannily specific recommendations: "It remains possible to trigger a wind slab avalanche. . . . This snow will feel upside down and stiff." Different kinds of terrain are assigned levels of danger, on a one-to-five scale; colorful diagrams with cartoon icons show which parts of the mountain—above the treeline, say, or southern aspects—are to be avoided.

Some experts worry that such diagrams give skiers a false sense of security. My sixty-seven-year-old godfather, Richard, happens to be the most experienced backcountry adventurer I know; a snowboarder for decades, he has logged more than a hundred thousand vertical metres in the past two years, in Kashmir, Antarctica, and other places. In the backcountry, he relies not just on forecasts but also on guides, to whom he attributes extraordinary diagnostic powers. Before taking a group out, a guide might dig a small column out of the slope. He'll examine the layers, sussing out weakness, assessing the look of the crystal grains. Then he'll tap the top of the column with his hand ten times, bending from the wrist. If the column survives, he'll do it again, bending from the elbow; finally, he'll do it from the shoulder. His interest is in when the column collapses, and how. Once, on a slope that seemed risky, a guide told Richard's group that, whatever they did, they must follow, one by one, to the right of his line. Each skier followed in turn, carefully staying to his right. As Richard descended, a layer of snow unsettled beneath him, a few feet to the left of the guide's tracks, and sent a wave across the bowl. The slope fell like a sheet.

One way to avoid avalanches is to ski shallower slopes. Slopes of around twenty-five degrees are perfectly enjoyable; steeper ones are only marginally more fun. And yet it's hard for skiers to hold back. "The tricky part is controlling our lust," a forecast reads. After a student of his died in an avalanche, Jordy Hendrikx, a professor at Montana State University, shifted his focus from geophysical research to behavioral science. ("Understanding how a crystal grows is not enough to change the current fatality profile," he told me.) In one long-running study, he had a large group of backcountry skiers log their activity with a G.P.S.-enabled app. He found that

"Big mixup at the airport. I'll tell you about it later. I see my bag waiting for me."

experts chose steeper terrain, as did all-male groups, especially younger ones. ("Quantifying the obvious," he has said.) When Tremper published his book, in 2008, he reported that, although a third of those who used the backcountry in Utah were women, women accounted for only 3.3 per cent of fatal accidents.

In the early two-thousands, when no amount of snow science seemed to be improving outcomes, the study of "human factors" that contributed to avalanche accidents became popular. Tremper lists six common "heuristic traps" that lead to avalanche fatalities: doing what is familiar; being committed to a goal, identity, or belief; following an "expert"; showing off when others are watching; competing for fresh powder; and seeking to be accepted by a group. The Swiss pocket guide for backcountry skiers is full of technical information about slabs and slope angles, but it also includes the advice "Don't give in to temptation!"

New pilots are said to be most accident-prone right after their hundred-and-fiftieth hour; that's when self-confidence peaks. Dave Richards, the Alta avalanche director, told me that, for many skiers, danger is highest right after the completion of an avalanche-avoidance course. The backcountry is what behavioral scientists call a "wicked" environment for learning: it gives you no negative feedback until it kills you.

A database maintained by the Colorado Avalanche Information Center contains aviation-style tick-tock accounts of avalanche fatalities. In January, 2019, a group of skiers taking a backcountry avalanche course went out with their instructor for a day in the field. The skiers followed a methodical, rigorous plan. At predetermined waypoints, the group assessed the conditions; they dug a snow pit, testing a snow column for strength. Their plan for the day included slope angles for all the terrain they might encounter. But they didn't measure the steepness in the field themselves, and one particular slope that they believed to be no more than twenty-nine degrees was actually thirty-two degrees. As the second of six skiers proceeded downward, the other four, waiting above, sidestepped in order to see his progress more clearly. The slope avalanched twice—the first one remote-triggered the second—and the second skier was buried. Two skiers turned their beacons to Search, monitoring their screens. They assembled their tent-pole-like probes, jamming them into the ground until they struck the buried skier. It took more than twenty-five minutes to shovel the victim out. The report, which identifies "a Persistent Slab avalanche problem," is longer than most, at pains to explain why this group—so well informed and meticulous—could still be caught.

On my first night at Alta, I stayed at one of the lodges. Since the road had closed, the cheap dorms filled up, four to a room. One man, Bill, forty-five years old, took a bottom bunk. A week earlier, he'd been in an avalanche—small, he said, and soft-slab. I asked him what it was like. "Manageable, and managed," he said. He'd realized that the slope had the potential to slide, but he knew what to do if that happened, so he skied it anyway. "I did a couple tomahawks," he said—tumbling end over end for three hundred feet, then standing up. Was he shaken? He thought about it. Actually, he said, he was serene. "Manageable, and managed," he repeated, from his bed.

Toward the end of my time in Switzerland, I spent the day with Stefan Margreth, S.L.F.'s chief civil engineer. Easygoing, he wore a pink-and-red winter hat. At the institute, Margreth is the spiritual descendant of Johann Coaz: he carries Switzerland's avalanche-hazard maps in his head. Margreth sometimes uses RAMMS to model avalanche risk. "It's a great honor that he even uses the program," Bartelt, its creator, said.

Many Swiss towns have building restrictions based on avalanche-hazard maps. "Everyone in the Swiss mountains knows their red zones and blue zones," Margreth told me. We drove to St. Antönien, a tiny farming village an hour outside Davos. The threat of avalanche there is so great that, in storms, residents wear beacons while tending their farms. Margreth helped design or approve nearly every avalanche-mitigation measure in town: a huge concrete wedge on the upslope side of the elementary school; vast lines of steel girders high in the starting zones; houses built into the sides of hills, so that snow slides right over them.

After the winter of 1951, a party from the federal government in Bern travelled to St. Antönien to discuss the question of resettlement. The townspeople wanted to stay. "The Swiss mentality is to let people live in the mountains," Margreth said. Taxpayers spent millions of dollars on mitigation measures; roads running up the mountain had to be built just to transport construction equipment. I asked Margreth why people had moved to St. Antönien in the first place. "The good places had been taken," he said, smiling. In Switzerland, even the mountains are crowded.

A few years back, Margreth was contacted by the emergency-programs manager and avalanche forecaster for the city of Juneau, Alaska. Several neighborhoods were in the runout zones of slide paths; it was probably the most significant avalanche problem in the United States. Could anything be done? Even if tens of millions of dollars were spent on mitigation, the houses could not be completely protected; their destruction was more or less inevitable. Margreth suggested that the city buy the owners out and keep people from building new homes. So far, this has proved politically impossible; the city of Juneau, which had already bought a few empty lots in the area, has invested in warning systems and road-protection protocols.

"Sometimes you need accidents," Margreth said. Atwater, in his book, suggests that "people need a good scare not less than every three years. Otherwise they begin to think that avalanche hazard is a figment of someone's imagination."

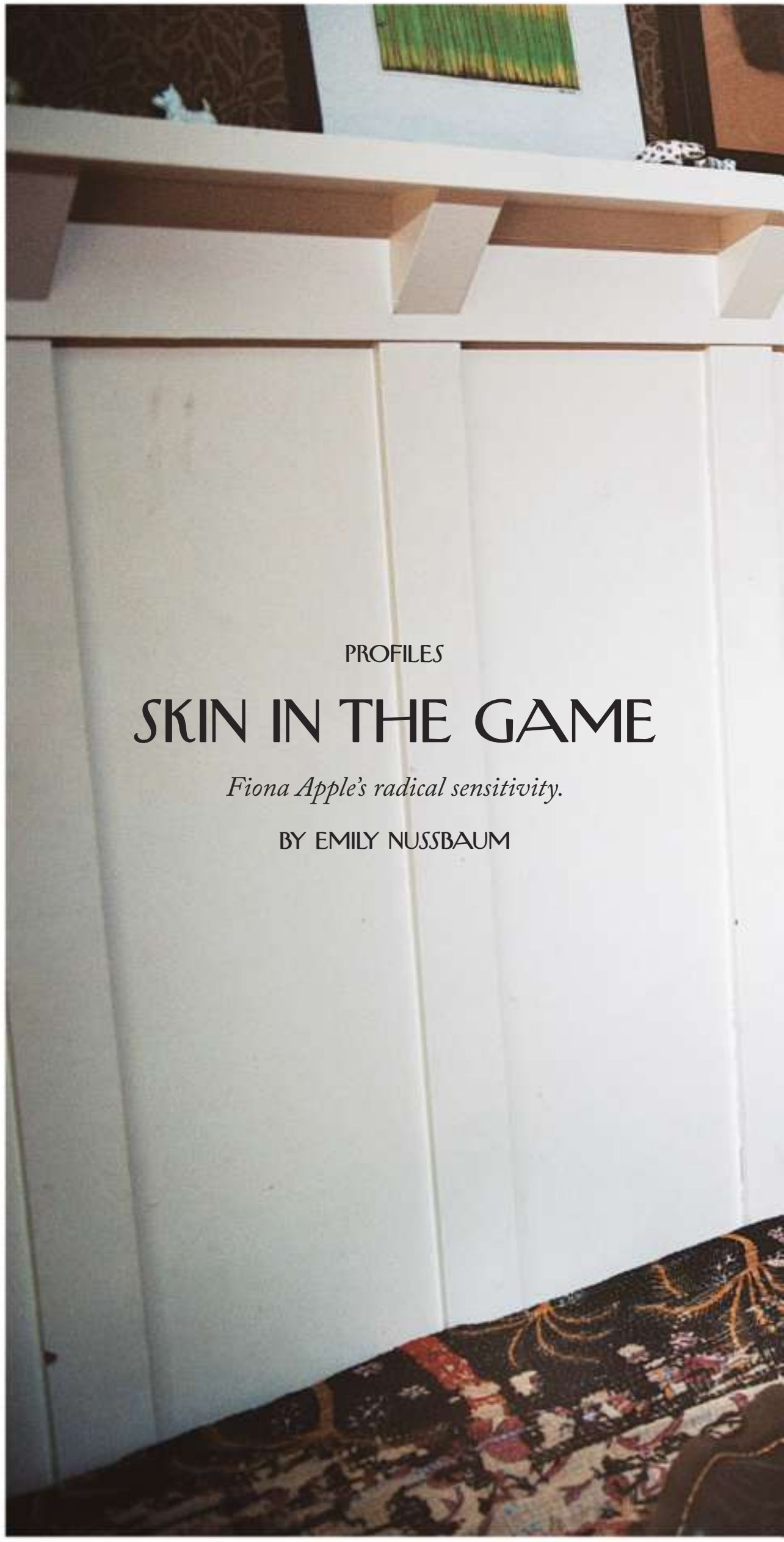
They can seem absurd to us, these people living at the base of steep hills. Don't they know they're idling in the face of disaster? The feeling was in the air in Switzerland, though not because of avalanches. As we walked on the road toward the edge of town, we saw diners enjoying themselves at sidewalk tables. "It's much too warm for a February day," Margreth said, in the winter sun. It had been three years since the team at the test site performed an experiment. Not enough snow had fallen. ♦

PROFILES

SKIN IN THE GAME

Fiona Apple's radical sensitivity.

BY EMILY NUSSBAUM



Apple's new album, "Fetch the Bolt Cutters," like all her others, arrived through a

Fiona Apple was wrestling with her dog, Mercy, the way a person might thrash, happily, in rough waves. Apple tugged on a purple toy as Mercy, a pit-bull-boxer mix, gripped it in her jaws, spinning Apple in circles. Worn out, they flopped onto two daybeds in the living room, in front of a TV that was always on. The first day that I visited, last July, it was set to MSNBC, which was airing a story about Jeffrey Epstein's little black book.

These days, the singer-songwriter, who is forty-two, rarely leaves her tranquil house, in Venice Beach, other than to take early-morning walks on the beach with Mercy. Five years ago, Apple stopped going to Largo, the Los Angeles venue where, since the late nineties, she'd regularly performed her thorny, emotionally revelatory songs. (Her song "Largo" still plays on the club's Web site.) She'd cancelled her most recent tour, in 2012, when Janet, a pit bull she had adopted when she was twenty-two, was dying. Still, a lot can go on without leaving home. Apple's new album, whose completion she'd been inching toward for years, was a tricky topic, and so, during the week that I visited, we cycled in and out of other subjects, among them her decision, a year earlier, to stop drinking; estrangements from old friends; and her memories of growing up, in Manhattan, as the youngest child in the "second family" of a married Broadway actor. Near the front door of Apple's house stood a chalkboard on wheels, which was scrawled with the title of the upcoming album: "Fetch the Bolt Cutters."

One afternoon, Apple's older sister, Amber, arrived to record vocal harmonies. In the living room, there was an upright piano, its top piled with keepsakes, including a stuffed toucan knitted by Apple's mother and a photograph of Martha Graham doing a backbend. Apple's friend Zelda Hallman, who had not long ago become her housemate, was in the sunny yellow kitchen, cooking tilapia for Mercy and for Hallman's Bernese mountain dog, Maddie. In the back yard, there was a guesthouse, where Apple's half brother, Bran Maggart, a carpenter, lived. (For years, he'd worked as a driver for Apple, who never got a license, and helped manage her tours.) Apple's father, Brandon Maggart, also lives in Venice Beach; her mother, Diane

slow-drip process of creative self-interrogation that has produced, over a quarter century, a narrow but deep songbook.

PHOTOGRAPH BY MALERIE MARDER

McAfee, a former dancer and actress, remains in New York, in the Morningside Heights apartment building where Apple grew up.

Amber, a cabaret singer who records under the name Maude Maggart, had brought along her thirteen-month-old baby, Winifred, who scooched across the floor, playing under the piano. Apple was there when Winifred was born, and, as we talked about the bizarreness of childbirth, Apple told me a joke about a lady who got pregnant with twins. Whenever people asked the lady if she wanted boys or girls, she said, "I don't care, I just want my children to be polite!" Nine months passed, but she didn't go into labor. A year went by—still nothing. "Eight, nine, twenty years!" Apple said, her eyebrows doing a jig. "Twenty-five years—and finally they're, like, 'We have to figure out what's going on in there.'" When doctors peeked inside, they found "two middle-aged men going, 'After *youuuu!*' 'No, after *youuuu!*'"

Amber was there to record one line: a bit of harmony on "Newspaper," one of thirteen new songs on the album. Apple, who wore a light-blue oxford shirt and loose beige pants, her hair in a low bun, stood by the piano, coaching Amber, who sat down in a wicker rocking chair, pulling Winifred onto her lap. "It's a shame, because you and I didn't get a witness!" Apple crooned, placing the notes in the air with her palm. Then the sisters sang, in harmony, "We're the only ones who know!" The "we're" came out as a jaunty warble, adding ironic subtext to the song, which was about two women connected by their histories with an abusive man. Apple, with her singular smoky contralto, modelled the complex emotions of the line for Amber, warming her up to record.

"Does that work?" Apple asked Winifred, who gazed up from her mother's lap. Abruptly, Apple bent her knees, poked her elbows back like wings, and swung her hips, peekabooing toward Winifred. The baby laughed. It was simultaneously a rehearsal and a playdate.

"Fetch the Bolt Cutters" is a reference to a scene in "The Fall," the British police procedural starring Gillian Anderson as a sex-crimes investigator; Anderson's character calls out the phrase after finding a locked door to a room where a girl has been tortured. Like all of Apple's projects, this one was taking a long while to emerge, arriving through a slow-drip process of creative self-interrogation that has produced, over a quarter century, a narrow but deep songbook. Her albums are both profoundly personal—tracing her heartaches, her showdowns with her own fragility, and her fierce, phoenix-like recoveries—and musically audacious, growing wilder and stranger with each round. As her 2005 song "Extraordinary Machine" suggests, whereas other artists might move fast, grasping for fresh influences and achieving superficial novelty, Apple prides herself on a stickier originality, one that springs from an internal tick-tock: "I still only travel by foot, and by foot it's a slow climb / But I'm good at being uncomfortable, so I can't stop changing all the time."

The new album, she said, was close to being finished, but, as with the twins from the joke, the due date kept getting pushed back. She was at once excited about these songs—composed and recorded at home, with all production decisions under her control—and apprehensive about some of their subject matter, as well as their raw sound (drums, chants, bells). She was also wary of facing public scrutiny again. Fame has long been a jarring experience for Apple, who has dealt since childhood with obsessive-compulsive disorder, depression, and anxiety.

After a while, she and Amber went into a small room—Apple's former bedroom, where, for years, she had slept on a futon with Janet. After the dog died, she'd found herself unable to fall asleep there, and had turned the room into a recording studio, although it looked nothing like one: it was cluttered, with one small window and no soundproofing. There was a beat-up wooden desk and a computer on which Apple recorded tracks, using GarageBand. There was a mike stand and a Day of the Dead painting of a smiling female skeleton holding a skeleton dog. Every surface, from the shelves to the floor, was covered in a mulch of battered percussion instruments: bells, wooden blocks, drums, metal squares.

The sisters recorded the lyric over and over, with Apple at the computer and Amber standing, Winifred on her hip. During one take, Amber pulled the neck of her turquoise leotard down and began nursing her daughter. Apple looked up from GarageBand, caught her sister's eye, and smiled. "It's happening—it's *happening*," she said.

When you tell people that you are planning to meet with Fiona Apple, they almost inevitably ask if she's O.K. What "O.K." means isn't necessarily obvious, however. Maybe it means healthy, or happy. Maybe it means creating the volcanic and tender songs that she's been writing since she was a child—or maybe it doesn't, if making music isn't what makes her happy. Maybe it means being *un*happy, but in a way that is still fulfilling, still meaningful. That's the conundrum when someone's artistry is tied so fully to her vulnerability, and to the act of dwelling in and stirring up her most painful emotions, as a sort of destabilizing muse.

In the nineties, Apple's emergence felt near-mythical. Fiona Apple McAfee-Maggart, the musically precocious, emotionally fragile descendant of a line of entertainers, was a classically trained pianist who began composing at seven. One night, at the age of sixteen, she was in her apartment, staring down at Riverside Park, when she thought she heard a voice telling her to record songs drawn from her notebooks, which were full of heartbreak and sexual trauma. She flew to L.A., where her father was living, and with his help recorded three songs; they made seventy-eight demo tapes, and he told her to prepare to hustle. Yet the first tape she shared was enough: a friend passed a copy to the music publicist she babysat for, who gave it to Andrew Slater, a prominent record producer and manager. Slater, then thirty-seven, hired a band, booked a studio in L.A., and produced her début album, "Tidal." It featured such sophisticated ballads as "Shadowboxer," as well as the hit "Criminal," which irresistibly combined a hip-hop beat, rattling piano, and sinuous flute; she'd written it in forty-five minutes, during a lunch break at the studio. The album sold 2.7 million copies.

Slater also oversaw a marketing campaign that presented his new artist as a sulky siren, transforming her into a global star and a media target. Diane McAfee remembers that time as

a "whirlwind," recalling the day when her daughter received an advance for "Tidal"—a check for a hundred thousand dollars. "I said, 'Oh, my God, this is unbelievable!'" McAfee told me. They were in their dining room, and Apple was "backing away, not excited." Because Apple was not yet eighteen, her mother had to co-sign her record contract.

The musician Aimee Mann and her partner, the musician Michael Penn, who was also signed with Slater at the time, remember seeing Apple perform at the Troubadour, in West Hollywood, at a private showcase for "Tidal," in 1996. Mann glimpsed in the teen-ager the kind of brazen, complex female musicianship that she'd been longing for—a tonic in an era dominated by indie-male swagger. Onstage, Apple was funny and chatty, calling the audience "grownups." After the show, she did cartwheels in the alley outside. Mann recalled Apple introducing the song "Carrion" with a story about how sometimes there's a person you go back to, again and again, who never gives you what you need, "and the lesson is *you don't need them*." As Apple's career accelerated, Mann read a *Rolling Stone* profile in which Apple spoke about having been raped, at twelve, by a stranger, who attacked her in a stairwell as her dog barked inside her family's apartment. Mann said that it was unheard of, and inspiring, for a female artist to speak so frankly about sexual violence, without shame or apology. But Apple's candor made her worry. Mann had experienced her own share of trauma; she'd also collapsed from exhaustion while on tour. "I was afraid of what would happen to her on the road," she said. "It's an unnatural way to live."

In fact, the turn of the millennium became an electric, unstable period for Apple, who was adored by her fans but also mocked, and leered at, by the male-dominated rock press, who often treated her as a tabloid curiosity—a bruised prodigy to be both ogled and pitied. Much of the press's response was connected to the 1997 video for "Criminal," whose director, Mark Romanek, has described it as a "tribute" to Nan Goldin's photographs of her junkie demimonde—although the stronger link is to Larry Clark's 1995 movie, "Kids," and to the quickly banned Calvin Klein ads depicting teens being coerced into making porn. When Apple's oldest friend, Manuela Paz, saw "Criminal," she was unnerved, not just by the sight of her friend in a lace teddy, gyrating among passed-out models, but also by a sense that the video, for all its male-gaze titillation, had uncannily absorbed the darker aspects of her and Apple's own milieu—one of teens running around upper Manhattan with little oversight. "How did they know?" Paz asked herself.

Apple's unscripted acceptance speech at the 1997 MTV Video Music Awards, in which she announced, "This world is bullshit," further stoked media hostility. The speech, which included her earnestly quoting Maya Angelou and encouraging fans not to model themselves on "what you think that *we* think is cool," seems, in retrospect, most shocking for how on target it is (something true of so many "crazy lady" scandals of that period, like Sinéad O'Connor on "Saturday Night Live," protesting sexual abuse in the Catholic Church). But, by 2000, when Apple had an onstage meltdown at the Manhattan venue Roseland, instability had become her "brand." She was haunted by her early interviews, like one in *Spin*, illustrated with lascivious photographs by Terry Richardson, that quoted her saying, "I'm going to die young. I'm going to cut another album, and I'm going to do good things, help people, and then I'm going to die." Apple's love life was heavily covered, too: she dated the magician David Blaine (who was then a member of Leonardo DiCaprio's "Pussy Posse") and the film director Paul Thomas Anderson, with whom she lived for several years. While Anderson and Apple were together, he released "Magnolia" and she released "When the Pawn . . . ," her flinty second album, whose full, eighty-nine-word title—a pugilistic verse written in response to the *Spin* profile—attracted its own stream of jokes.

During this period, Mark (Flanny) Flanagan, the owner of Largo, a brainy enclave of musicians and comedians within show-biz L.A., became Apple's friend and patron. (In an e-mail to me, he called her "our little champ.") One day, Apple visited his office, wondering what would happen if she cut off her fingertip—*then* would her management let her stop touring? Flanagan, disturbed, told her that she could get a note from a shrink instead, and urged her to refuse to do anything she didn't want to do.

As the decades passed, Apple's reputation as a "difficult woman" receded. After she left Anderson, in 2002, she holed up in Venice Beach, emerging

every few years with a new album: first, "Extraordinary Machine" (2005), a glorious glockenspiel of self-assertion and payback; then the wise, insightful "The Idler Wheel . . ." (2012). She was increasingly recognized as a singer-songwriter on the level of Joni Mitchell and Bob Dylan. The music of other nineties icons grew dated, or panicky in its bid for relevance, whereas Apple's albums felt unique and lasting. The skittering ricochets of her melodies matched the shrewd wit of her lyrics, which could swerve from damning to generous in a syllable, settling scores but also capturing the perversity of a brain aflame with sensitivity: "How can I ask anyone to love me/When all I do is beg to be left alone?"

Today, Apple still bridles at old coverage of her. Yet she remains almost helplessly transparent about her struggles—she's a blurter who knows that it's a mistake to treat journalists as shrinks, but does so anyway. She's conscious of the multiple ironies in her image. "Everyone has always worried that people are taking advantage of me," she said. "Even the people who take advantage of me worry that people are taking advantage of me."

Lurking on Tumblr (where messages from her are sometimes posted on the fan page Fiona Apple Rocks), she can see how much the culture has transformed, becoming one shared virtual notebook. Female singers like Lady Gaga and Kesha now talk openly about having been raped—and, in the wake of #MeToo, it's more widely understood that sexual violence is as common as rain. Mental illness is less of a taboo, too. In recent years, a swell of teen-age musicians, such as Lorde and Grimes, have produced bravura albums in Apple's tradition, while young female activists, including Greta Thunberg and Emma González, keep announcing, to an audience more prepared to listen, that this world is bullshit.

Apple knows the cliché about early fame—that it freezes you at the age you achieved it. Because she'd never had to toil in anonymity, and had learned her craft and made her mistakes in public, she'd been perceived, as she put it to me ruefully, as "the patron saint of mental illness, instead of as someone who *creates* things." If she wanted to keep bringing new songs into the world, she needed to have thicker skin. But that had never been her gift.

As we talked in the studio, Apple's band member Amy Aileen Wood arrived, with new mixes. Wood, an indie-rock drummer, was one of three musicians Apple had enlisted to help create the new album; the others were the bassist Sebastian Steinberg, of the nineties group Soul Coughing, and Davíd Garza, a Latin-rock singer-songwriter and guitarist. Wood and Apple told me that their first encounter, at a recording studio two decades ago, was awkward. Apple remembered feeling intimidated by Wood and by her girlfriend, who seemed "tall and cool." When Wood described something as "rad," Apple shot back, "Did you really just say *rad*?" Wood hid in the bathroom and cried.

Now Wood and her father, John Would, a sound engineer, were collaborating with Apple on building mixes from hundreds of homemade takes. (Apple also worked with Dave Way and, later in the process, Tchad Blake.) The earliest glimmers of "Fetch the Bolt Cutters" began in 2012, when Apple experimented with a concept album about her Venice Beach home, jokingly called "House Music." She also considered basing an album on the Pando—a giant grove of aspens, in Utah, that is considered a single living being—creating songs that shared common roots.

Finally, around 2015, she pulled together the band. She and Steinberg, a joyfully eccentric bassist with a long gray beard, had played live together for years, and had shared intense, sometimes painful experiences, including an arrest, while on tour in 2012, for hashish possession. (Apple spent the night in a Texas jail cell, where she defiantly gave what Steinberg described as "her best vocal performance ever"; she also ended up on TMZ.) Steinberg, who worked with Apple on "Idler Wheel," said that her new album was inspired by her fascination with the potential of using a band "as an organism instead of an assemblage—something natural."

The first new song that Apple recorded was "On I Go," which was inspired by a Vipassana chant; she sang it into her phone while hiking in Topanga Canyon. Back at home, she dug out old lyrics and wrote new ones, and hosted anarchic bonding sessions with her bandmates. "She wanted to start from the ground," Garza said. "For her, the ground is rhythm." The band gathered percussive objects: containers wrapped with rubber bands, empty oilcans filled with dirt, rattling seedpods that Apple had baked in her oven. Apple even tapped on her dog Janet's bones, which she kept in a pretty beige box in the living room. Apple and the other musicians would march around her house and chant. "Sebastian has a low, sonorous voice," Garza said, of these early meetings. "Amy's supershy. I'm like Slim Whitman—we joke my voice is higher than Fiona's. She has that husky beautiful timbre, and she would just . . . speak her truth. It felt more like a sculpture being built than an album being made."

Steinberg told me, "We played the way kids play or the way birds sing." Wood recalled, "We would have cocktails and jam," adding that it took some time for her to get used to these epic "meditations," which could veer into emotional chaos. Steinberg recalls "stomping on the walls, on the floor—playing her house." Once, when Apple was upset about a recent breakup, with the writer Jonathan Ames, she got into a drunken argument with the band members; Wood took her drums to a gig, which Apple misunderstood as a slight, and Apple went off and wrote a bitterly rollicking song about rejection, "The Drumset Is Gone."

There were more stops and starts. A three-week group visit to the Sonic Ranch recording studio, in rural Texas—where some band members got stoned in pecan fields, Mercy accidentally ate snake poison, and Apple watched the movie "Whiplash" on mushrooms—was largely a wash, despite such cool experiments as recording inside an abandoned water tower. But Garza praised Apple as "someone who really trusts the unknown, trusting the river," adding, "She's the queen of it."

Once Apple returned to Venice Beach, she finally began making headway, rerecording and rewriting songs in uneven intervals, often alone, in her former bedroom. At first, she recorded long, uncut takes of herself hitting instruments against random things; she built these files, which had names like "metal shaker," "couch tymp," and "bean

drums," into a "percussion orchestra," which she used to make songs. She yowled the vocals over and over, stretching her voice into fresh shapes; like a Dogme 95 filmmaker, she rejected any digital smoothing. "She's not afraid to let her voice be *in* the room and *of* the room," Garza said. "Modern recording erases that."

The resulting songs are so percussion-heavy that they're almost martial. Passages loop and repeat, and there are out-of-the-blue tempo changes. Steinberg described the new numbers as closer to "Hot Knife," an "Idler Wheel" track that pairs Andrews Sisters-style harmonies with stark timpani beats, than to her early songs, which were intricately orchestrated. "It's very raw and unslick," he said, of the new work, because her "agenda has gotten wilder and a lot less concerned with what the outside world thinks—she's not seventeen, she's forty, and she's got no reason not to do exactly what she wants."

Apple had been writing songs in the same notebooks for years, scribbling new lyrics alongside older ones. At one point, as we sat on the floor near the piano, she grabbed a stack of them, hunting for some lines she'd written when she was fifteen: "Evil is a relay sport / When the one who's burned turns to pass the torch." "My handwriting is so different," she marvelled, flipping pages. She found a diary entry from 1997: "I'm insecure about the guys in my band. I want to spend more time with them! But it seems impossible to ever go out and have fun." Apple laughed out loud, amazed. "I can't even recognize this person," she said. " 'I want to go out and have fun!' "

"Here's the bridge to 'Fast as You Can,' " she said, referring to a song from "When the Pawn . . . ." Then she announced, "Oh, here it is—'Evil is a relay sport.' " She continued reading: "It breathes in the past and then—" She shot me a knowing glance. "Lots of my writing from then is just, like, I don't know how to say it: *a young person trying to be a writer*." Written in the margin was the word "Help."

Whenever I asked Apple how she created melodies, she apologized for lacking the language to describe her process (often with an anxious detour about not being as good a drummer as Wood). She said that her focus on rhythm had some connections to the O.C.D. rituals she'd developed as a child, like crunching leaves and counting breaths, or roller-skating around her dining-room table eighty-eight times—the number of keys on a piano—while singing Bob Dylan's "Like a Rolling Stone."

But Apple brightened whenever she talked about writing lyrics, speaking confidently about assonance and serendipity, about the joy of having the words "glide down the back of my throat"—as she put it, stroking her neck—when she got them exactly right. She collects words on index cards: "Angel," "Excel," "Intel," "Gel." She writes the alphabet above her drafts, searching, with puzzle-solver focus, for puns, rhymes, and accidental insights.

The new songs were full of spiky, layered wordplay. In "Rack of His," Apple sings, like a sideshow barker, "Check out that rack of his! / Look at that row of guitar necks / Lined up like eager fillies / Outstretched like legs of Rockettes." In the darkly funny "Kick Me Under the Table," she tells a man at a fancy party, "I would beg to disagree / But begging disagrees with me." As frank as her lyrics can be, they are not easily decoded as pure biography. She said, of "Rack of His," "I started writing this song years ago about one relationship, and then, when I finished it, it was about a different relationship."

When I described the clever "Ladies"—the music of which she co-wrote with Steinberg—as having a vaudeville vibe, Apple flinched. She found the notion corny. "It's just, like, something I've got in my blood that I'm gonna need to get rid of," she said. Other songs felt close to hip-hop, with her voice used more for force and flow than for melody, and as a vehicle for braggadocio and insults. There was a pungency in Apple's torch-and-honey voice emitting growls, shrieks, and hoots.

Some of the new material was strikingly angry. The cathartic "For Her" builds to Apple hollering, "Good mornin'! Good mornin' / You raped me in the same bed your daughter was born in." The song had grown out of a

Apple, in 1996. The press treated her as a bruised prodigy to be ogled and pitied.

MARK BAKER / GETTY

recording session the band held shortly after the nomination hearings of the Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh; like many women, Apple felt scalded with rage about survivors of sexual violence being disbelieved. The title track came to her later; a meditation on feeling ostracized, it jumps between lucidity and fury. Drumsticks clatter sparely over gentle Mellotron notes as Apple muses, "I've been thinking about when I was trying to be your friend / I thought it was, then— / But it wasn't, it wasn't genuine." Then, as she sings, "Fetch the bolt cutters, I've been in here too long," her voice doubles, harmonies turning into a hubbub, and there's a sudden "meow" sound. In the final moments, dogs bark as Apple mutters, "Whatever happens, whatever happens."

Partway through, she sings, "I thought that being blacklisted would be grist for the mill." She improvised the line while recording; she knew that it was good, because it was embarrassing. "It sounds bitter," she said. The song isn't entirely despairing, though. The next line makes an impassioned allusion to a song by Kate Bush, one of Apple's earliest musical heroines: "I need to run up that hill / I *will*, I *will*, I *will*."

One day during my July visit, Ames, Apple's ex-boyfriend, stopped by, on his way to the beach. "Mercy, you are so powerful!" he said, as the dog jumped on him. "I'm waiting for her to get calmer, so I can give her a nice hug." Apple had described Ames to me as her kindest ex, and there was an easy warmth between them. They took turns recalling their love affair, which began in 2006, when Apple attended a performance by Ames at the Moth, the storytelling event, in New York.

For years, Ames had written candid, funny columns in the New York *Press* about sex and his psychological fragilities, a history that appealed to Apple. They were together for four years, then broke up, in 2010; five years later, they reunited, but the relationship soon ended again, partly because of Ames's concerns about Apple's drinking. Ames recalled to Apple that, as the relationship soured, "you would yell at me and call me stupid." He added that he didn't have much of a temper, which became its own kind of problem.

"You would annoy me," Apple said, with a smile.

"I was annoying!" he said, laughing.

They were being so loving with each other—even about the bad times, like when Ames would find Apple passed out and worry that she'd stopped breathing—that it seemed almost mysterious that they had broken up. Then, step by step, the conversation hit the skids. The turn came when Ames started offering Apple advice on knee pain that was keeping her from walking Mercy—a result, she believed, of obsessive hiking. He told her to read "Healing Back Pain," by John Sarno. The pain, he said, was repressed anger.

At first, Apple was open to this idea—or, at least, she was polite about it. But, when Ames kept looping back to the notion, Apple went ominously quiet. Her eyes turned red, rimmed with tears that didn't spill. She curled up, pulling sofa cushions to her chest, her back arched, glaring.

It was like watching their relationship and breakup reënacted in an hour. When Ames began describing "A Hundred Years of Solitude" in order to make the point that Apple had a "Márquezian sense of time," she shot back, "Are you saying that time is like thirty-seven years tied to a tree with me?" Ames used to call her the Negative Juicer, Apple said, her voice sardonic: "I just extract the negative stuff." She spun this into a black aria of self-loathing, arguing, like a prosecutor, for the most vicious interpretation of herself: "I put it in a thing and I bring out all the *bad* stuff. And I serve it up to everyone so that they'll give me attention. And it poisons everyone, so they only listen to it when they're in fucked-up places—and it's a *good* sign when they stop listening to me, because that means that they're not hurting themselves on purpose."

Ames pushed back, alarmed. If he'd ever called her the Negative Juicer, he said, he didn't mean it as an attack on her art—just that she could take a nice experience and find the bad in it. Her music had pain but also so much joy and redemption, he said. But Ames couldn't help himself: he kept bringing up Sarno.

Somehow, the conversation had become a debate about the confessional nature of their work. Was it a good thing for Apple to keep digging up past suffering? Was this labor both therapeutic and generative—a mission that could help others—or was it making her sick? Ames said that he didn't feel comfortable exposing himself that way anymore, especially in the social-media age. "It's a

BEACH GLASS

Who knew this too could become endangered or extinct?
They gave me a little pail so I collected beach glass and shells.
Who knew the sound in a seashell wasn't your own blood—
No more than the ocean? It was the shell's chambers breathing,

A voice of air: Not churning breakers, nor a pulse in your ear.
In the sun's furnace glare, the cloudy smooth gemstones
Couched an interior fire. Like shells, progeny of the beach.
Back then, who knew talcum powder could ignite cancer?

Cobalt from Phillips' Milk of Magnesia. Emerald from Coke.
Wildroot Cream-Oil, Desert Flower, Serutan—the years
Eroded their pale glitter. I had a friend once who loved
Buying the water that came in plastic bottles: Nature

Mastered by invention. Who knew those very bottles could
Strangle the ocean? Did their chemicals make him sick?
Prone on the sand, I studied an inch from my eye the jagged
Clear granules they told me were seeds of molten glass.

—Robert Pinsky

different world!" he said. "You take one line out of context . . ." For more than a decade, Ames has been working in less personal modes; his noir novel "You Were Never Really Here" was recently made into a movie starring Joaquin Phoenix.

Apple said, "I haven't wanted to drink straight vodka so much in a while."

"I'm triggering you," Ames responded.

"You *are*," she said, smiling wearily. "It's not your fault, Jonathan. I love you."

When Ames stepped out briefly, Apple said that what had frustrated her was the idea that "there was a way out"—that her pain was her choice.

Zelda Hallman, Apple's housemate, had been sitting with us, listening. She pointed out that self-help books like "The Secret" had the same problem: they made your suffering all your fault.

"Fuck 'The Secret'!" Apple shouted.

When Ames came back and mentioned Sarno again, Apple interrupted him: "That's a great way to be in regular life. But if you're making a song? And you're making music and there is going to be passion in it and there is going to be anger in it?" She went on, "You have to go to the myelin sheath—you know, to the central nervous system—for it to be *good*, I feel like. And if that's not true? Then fuck me, I wasted my fucking life and ruined everything."

She recalled a day when she had been working on a piano riff that was downbeat but also "fluttering, soaring," and that reminded her of Ames. She said that he had asked her to name the resulting song "Jonathan." (The lovely, eerie track, which is on "Idler Wheel," includes the line "You like to captain a capsized ship.") "No, no," he said. "I didn't!" As Ames began telling his side of the story, Apple said, icily, "I think that water is going to get real cold real soon. You should probably go to the beach."

He went off to put on his bathing suit. By the time he left, things had eased up. She hugged him goodbye, looking tiny. After Ames was gone, she said that she hated the way she sometimes acted with him—contemptuous, as if she'd absorbed the style of her most unkind ex-boyfriend. But she also said that she wouldn't have called Ames himself stupid, explaining, "He doesn't talk the way that I talk, and like my brother talks, and get it all out, like, 'What the fuck are you talking about? That's stupid!' I'm not necessarily angry when I'm doing that."

The next day, she sent me a video. "We've been to the beach!" she announced, panting, as Mercy ran around in the background. "Because it's her birthday!" Apple had taken Ames's advice, she said, and gone for a walk, behaving as if she weren't injured. So far, her knees didn't hurt. "Soooo . . . he was right *all along*," Apple said, her eyes wide. Then she glanced at the camera slyly, the corner of her mouth pulled up. "Orrrrr . . . I just rested my knees for a while."

Apple goes to bed early; when I visited, we'd end things before she drifted into a smeary, dreamy state, often after smoking pot, which Hallman would pass to her in the living room. Late one afternoon, Apple talked about the album's themes. She said, of the title, "Really, what it's about is not being afraid to speak." Another major theme was women—specifically, her struggle to "not fall in love with the women who hate me." She described these songs as acts of confrontation with her "shadow self," exploring questions like "Why in the past have you been so socially blind to think that you could be friends with your ex-boyfriend's new girlfriend by getting her a gift?" At the time, she thought that she was being generous; now she recognized the impulse as less benign, a way of "campaigning not to be ousted."

The record dives into such conflicting impulses: she empathizes with other women, rages at them, grows infatuated

with them, and mourns their rejection, sometimes all at once. She roars, in "Newspaper," "I wonder what lies he's telling you about me / To make sure that we'll never be friends!" In "Ladies," she describes, first with amusement, then in a dark chant, "the revolving door which keeps turning out more and more good women like you / Yet another woman to whom I won't get through." In "Shameka," she celebrates a key moment in middle school, when a tough girl told the bullied Apple, "You have potential."

As a child, Apple longed to be "a pea in a pod" with other girls, as she was, for a while, with Manuela Paz, for whom she wrote her first song. But as an adult she has hung out mainly with men. She does have some deep female friendships, including with Nalini Narayan, an emergency-room nurse, whom she met, in 1997, in the audience at one of her concerts, and who described Apple as "an empath on a completely different level than anyone I've met." More recently, Apple has become close with a few younger artists. The twenty-one-year-old singer Mikaela Straus, a.k.a. King Princess, who recently recorded a cover of Apple's song "I Know," called her "family" and "a fucking legend." Straus said, "You never hear a Fiona Apple line and say, 'That's cheesy.'" The twenty-seven-year-old actress Cara Delevingne is another friend; she visited Apple's home to record harmonies on the song "Fetch the Bolt Cutters." (She's the one making that kooky "meow.")

But Apple has more complicated dynamics with a wider circle of friends, exes, and collaborators. Starting with her first heartbreak, at sixteen, she has repeatedly found herself in love triangles, sometimes as the secret partner, sometimes as the deceived one. As we talked, she stumbled on a precursor for this pattern: "Maybe it's because my mother was the other woman?"

Apple's parents met in 1969, during rehearsals for "Applause," a Broadway musical based on "All About Eve." Her mother, McAfee, was cast as Eve; her father, Maggart, as the married playwright. Maggart was then an actor on the stage and on TV (he'd been on "Sesame Street"); the sexy, free-spirited McAfee was a former June Taylor dancer. Throughout Apple's childhood, she and her sister regularly visited the home, in Connecticut, where Maggart's five other children and their mother, LuJan, lived. LuJan was welcoming, encouraging all the children to grow close—but Apple's mother was not invited. Apple, with an uneasy laugh, told me that, for all the time she'd spent interrogating her past, this link had never crossed her mind.

Her fascination with women seemed tied, too, to the female bonding of the #MeToo era—to the desire to compare

old stories, through new eyes. In July, she sent me a video clip of Jimi Hendrix that reminded her of a surreal aspect of the day she was raped: for a moment, when the stranger approached her, she mistook him for Hendrix. During the assault, she willed herself to think that the man *was* Hendrix. "It felt safer, and strangely it hasn't ruined Jimi Hendrix for me," she said. Years later, however, she found herself hanging out with a man who was a Hendrix fan. One night, they did mushrooms at Johnny Depp's house, in the Hollywood Hills. Depp, who was editing a film, was sober that night; as Apple recalled, he "kind of led" her and her friend to a bedroom, then shut the door and left. "Nothing bad happened, but I felt kind of used and uncomfortable with my friend making out with me," she said. "I used to just let things happen. I remember I wrote the bridge to 'Fast as You Can' in the car on the way home, and he was playing Jimi Hendrix, and my mind was swirling things together."

That has always been Apple's experience: the past overlapping with the present, just as it does in her notebooks. Sometimes it recurs through painful flashbacks, sometimes as echoes to be turned into art. The evening at Depp's house wasn't a #MeToo moment, she added. "Johnny Depp was a nice guy, and so was my friend. But I think that, at that time, I was struggling with my sexuality, and trying to force it into what I thought it should be, and everything felt dirty. Going out with boys, getting high, getting scared, and going home feeling like a dirty wimp was my thing."

Apple came of age in a culture that viewed young men as potential auteurs and young women as commodities to be used, then discarded. Although she had only positive memories of her youthful romance with David Blaine, she was disturbed to learn that he was listed in Jeffrey Epstein's black book. In high school, Apple was friends with Mia Farrow's daughter Daisy Previn, and during sleepovers at Farrow's house she used to run into Woody Allen in the kitchen. "There are all these unwritten but signed N.D.A.s all over the place," she said, about the entertainment industry. "Because you'll have to deal with the repercussions if you talk."

She met Paul Thomas Anderson in 1997, during a *Rolling Stone* cover shoot in which she floated in a pool, her hair fanning out like Ophelia's. She was twenty; he was twenty-seven. After she climbed out of the water, her first words to him were "Do you smoke pot?" Anderson followed her to Hawaii. (The protagonist of his film "Punch-Drunk Love" makes the same impulsive journey.) "That's where we solidified," she told me. "I remember going to meet him at the bar at the Mandarin Oriental Hotel, and he was laughing at me because I was marching around on what he called my 'determined march to nowhere.'"

The singer and the director became an It Couple, their work rippling with mutual influences. She wrote a rap for "Magnolia"; he directed videos for her songs. But, as Apple remembers it, the romance was painful and chaotic. They snorted cocaine and gobbled Ecstasy. Apple drank, heavily. Mostly, she told me, he was coldly critical, contemptuous in a way that left her fearful and numb. Apple's parents remember an awful night when the couple took them to dinner and were openly rude. (Apple backs this up: "We both attended that dinner as little fuckers.") In the lobby, her mother asked Anderson why Apple was acting this way. He snapped, "Ask yourself—you made her."

Anderson had a temper. After attending the 1998 Academy Awards, he threw a chair across a room. Apple remembers telling herself, "Fuck this, this is not a good relationship." She took a cab to her dad's house, but returned home the next day. In 2000, when she was getting treatment for O.C.D., her psychiatrist suggested that she do volunteer work with kids who had similar conditions. Apple was buoyant as Anderson drove her to an orientation at U.C.L.A.'s occupational-therapy ward, but he was fuming. He screeched up to the sidewalk, undid her seat belt, and shoved her out of his car; she fell to the ground, spilling her purse in front of some nurses she was going to be working with. At parties, he'd hiss harsh words in her ear, calling her a bad partner, while behaving sweetly on the surface; she'd tear up, which, she thinks, made her look unstable to strangers. (Anderson, through his agent, declined to comment.)

Anderson didn't hit her, Apple said. He praised her as an artist. Today, he's in a long-term relationship with the actress Maya Rudolph, with whom he has four children. He directed the video for "Hot Knife," in 2011; Apple said that by then she felt more able to hold her own—and she said that he might have changed. Yet the relationship had warped her early years, she said, in ways she still reckoned with. She'd never spoken poorly of him, because it didn't seem "classy"; she wavered on whether to do so now. But she wanted to put an end to many fans' nostalgia about their time

together. "It's a secret that keeps us connected," she told me.

Apple was also briefly involved with the comedian Louis C.K. After the *Times* published an exposé of his sexual misconduct, in 2017, she had faith that C.K. would be the first target of #MeToo to take responsibility for his actions, maybe by creating subversive comedy about shame and compulsion. When a hacky standup set of his was leaked online, she sent him a warm note, urging him to dig deeper.

One of the women C.K. harassed was Rebecca Corry, a standup comedian who founded an advocacy organization for pit bulls, Stand Up for Pits. Apple began working with the group, and, once she got to know Corry, she started to see C.K. in a harsher light. The comedy that she'd admired for its honesty now looked "like a smoke screen," she said. In a text, she told me that, if C.K. wasn't capable of more severe self-scrutiny, "he's useless." She added, "I SHAKE when I have to think and write about myself. It's scary to go there but I go there. He is so WEAK."

At times, Apple questioned her ability to be in any romantic relationship. Last fall, she went through another breakup, with a man she had dated for about a year. "This is my marriage right now," she said of her platonic intimacy with Zelda Hallman. Apple told me that they'd met in a near-mystical way: while out on a walk, she'd blown a dandelion, wishing for a dog-friend for Mercy, then turned a corner and saw Hallman, walking Maddie. When Apple's second romance with Ames was ending, she started inviting Hallman to stay over. "I'd have night terrors and stuff," Apple recalled. "And one day I woke up and she was sitting in the chair—she'd sat there all night, watching me, making sure I was O.K. I was feeling safer with her here." Apple fantasized about a kind of retirement: in a few years, she and Hallman might buy land back East "and move there with the doggies."

Hallman, an affable, silver-haired lesbian, grew up poor in Appalachia; after studying engineering at Stanford, she worked in the California energy industry. In the mid-aughts, she moved to L.A. to try filmmaking, getting some small credits. Each woman called their relationship balanced—they split expenses, they said—but Hallman's role displaced, to some degree, the one Apple's brother had played. In addition, Hallman sat in on our interviews and at recording sessions; she often took videos, posting them online. They slept on the daybeds in the living room. Apple had made it clear that anyone who questioned her friend's presence would get cut out. Hallman described their dynamic as like a "Boston marriage—but in the way that outsiders had *imagined* Boston marriages to be."

Hallman said that she hadn't recognized Apple when they met. Initially, she'd mistaken the singer for someone younger, just another Venice Beach music hopeful in danger of being exploited: "I felt relieved when she said she had a boyfriend in the Hills, to take care of her."

"Oh, my God, you were one of *them!*" Apple said, laughing.

After my July visit, Apple began to text me. She sent a recording of a song that she'd heard in a dream, then a recording describing the dream. She texted about watching "8 Mile"—"doing the nothing that comes before my little concentrated spurt of work"—and about reading a brain study about rappers that made her wonder where her brain "lit up" when she sang. "I'm hoping that I develop that ability to let my medial prefrontal cortex blow out the lights around it!" she joked. Occasionally, she sent a screenshot of a text from someone else, seeking my interpretation (a tendency that convinced me she likely did the same with my texts).

In a video sent in August, she beamed, thrilled about new mixes that she'd been struggling to "elevate." "I always think of myself as a half-ass person, but, if I half-assed it, it still sounds really good." She added that she'd whispered into the bathroom mirror, "You did a good job."

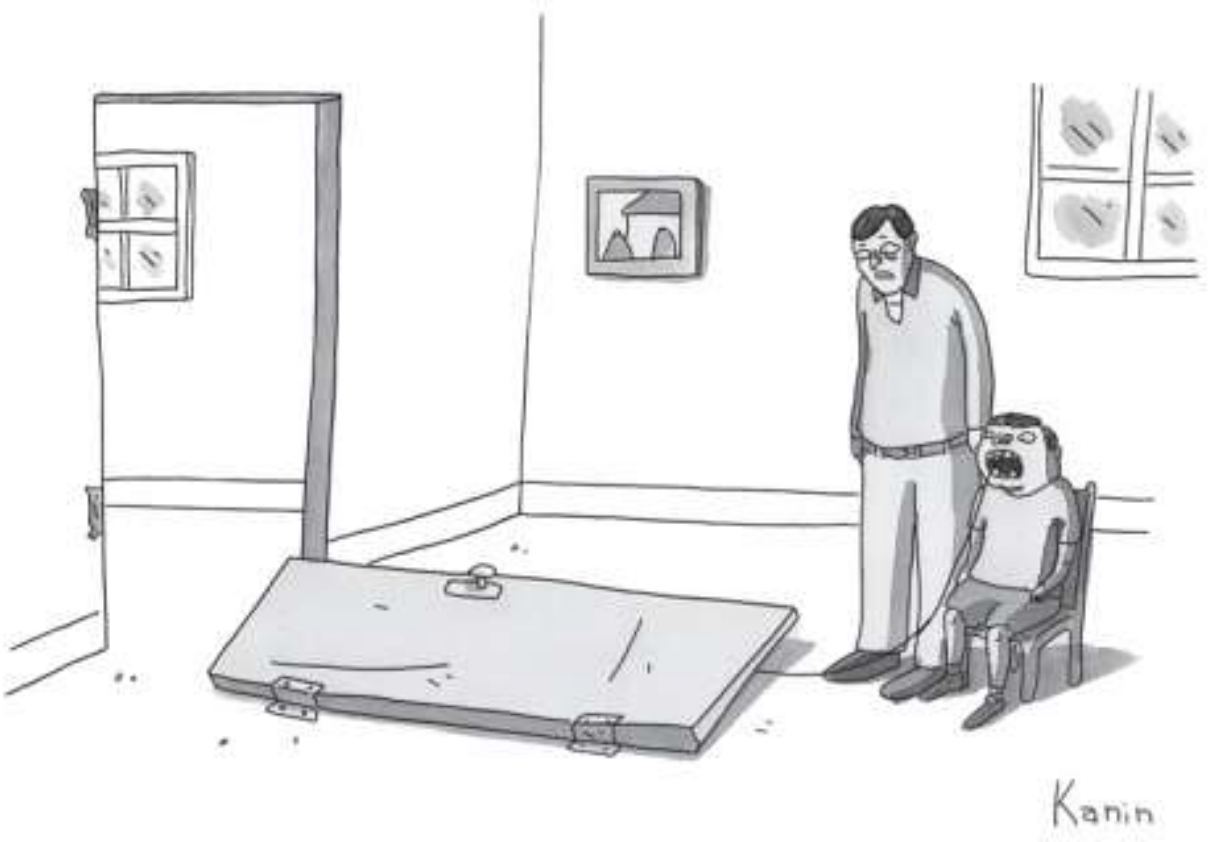
In another video—broken into three parts—she appeared in closeup, in a white tank top, free-associating. She described a colorized photograph from Auschwitz she'd seen on Tumblr, then moved on to the frustrations of O.C.D.—how it made her "freak out about the littlest things, like infants freak out." She talked about Jeffrey Epstein and the comfort of dumb TV; she held up a "cool metal instrument," stamped "1932," that she'd ordered from Greece. Near the end of the video, she wondered why she was rambling, then added, "Oh—I also ate some pot. I forgot about that. Well, knowing me, I'll probably send this to you!"

Apple's lifelong instinct has been to default to honesty, even if it costs her. In an era of slick branding, she is one of the last Gen X artists: reflexively obsessed with authenticity and "selling out," disturbed by the affectlessness of teen-girl "influencers" hawking sponcon and bogus uplift. (When she told an interviewer that she pitied Justin Bieber's thirsty request for fans to stream his new single as they slept, Beliebers spent the next day rage-tweeting that Apple was a jealous "nobody," while Apple's fans mocked them as ignoramuses.)

Apple told me that she didn't listen to any modern music. She chalked this up to a fear of outside influences, but she had a tetchiness about younger songwriters, too. She had always possessed aspects of Emily Dickinson, in the poet's "I'm Nobody" mode: pridefulness in retreat. Apple sometimes fantasized about pulling a Garbo: she'd release one final album, then disappear. But she also had something that resembled a repetition compulsion—she wanted to take all the risks of her early years, but this time have them work out right.

When I returned to Venice Beach, in September, the mood was different. Anxiety suffused the house. In July, Apple had been worried about returning to public view, but she was also often playful and energized, tweaking mixes. Now the thought of what she'd recorded brought on paralyzing waves of dread.

To distract herself, she'd turned to other projects. She accepted a request from Sarah Treem, the co-creator of the Showtime series "The Affair," to cover the Waterboys song "The Whole of the Moon" for the show's finale. (Apple had also written the show's potent theme song—the keening "Container.") Apple agreed to write a jokey song for the Fox cartoon



"I don't think that tooth is going anywhere."

• •

"Bob's Burgers," and some numbers for an animated musical sitcom, "Central Park." She was proud to hit deadlines, to handle her own business. "I have a sense of humor," she told me. "I'm not that fucking fragile all the time! I'm an adult. You can talk to me." But, before I arrived one day, she texted that things weren't going well, so that I'd be prepared.

That afternoon, we found ourselves lounging on the daybeds with Hallman, watching "The Affair." Apple had already seen these episodes, which were from the show's penultimate season. In August, she'd sent me a video of herself after watching one, tears rolling down her face. That episode was about the death of Alison, one of the main characters. Played by Ruth Wilson, Alison is a waitress living in Montauk, an intense beauty who is grieving the drowning death of her son and suffers from depression and P.T.S.D. She falls into an affair with a novelist, and both of their marriages dissolve. The story is told from clashing perspectives, but in the episode that Apple had watched, only one account felt "true": an ex-boyfriend of Alison's breaks her skull, then drops her unconscious body in the ocean, making her death look like a suicide.

As we watched, Apple took notes, sitting cross-legged on the daybed. She saw herself in several characters, but she was most troubled by an identification with Alison, who worries that she's a magnet for pain—a victim that men try to "save" and end up hurting. In one sequence, Alison, devastated after a breakup, gets drunk on a flight to California, as her seat partner flirts aggressively, feeding her cocktails. He assaults Alison as she drifts in and out of consciousness. She fights back, complaining to the flight attendant, but the man turns it all around, making her seem like the crazy one; she winds up handcuffed, as other passengers stare at her. Apple found the sequence horrifying—it reminded her of how she came across in her worst press.

Her head lowered and her arms crossed, she began to perseverate on her fears of touring. She ticked off potential outcomes: "I say the right thing, but I look the wrong way, so they say something about the way I look"; "I look the right way, but I say the wrong thing, so they say something mean about what I said." She went on, "I have a temper. I have lots of rage inside. I have lots of sadness inside of me. And I really, really, really can't stand assholes. If I'm in front of one, and I happen to be in a public place, and I lose my shit—and that's a possibility—that's not going to be any good to me, but I won't be able to help it, because I'll want to defend myself."

Later, we tried to listen to the album. She played the newest version of "Rack of His," but got frustrated by the tinny compression. She worried that she'd built "a record that can't be made into a record." When she'd get mad, or say "fuck," Mercy would get agitated; wistfully, Apple told me that she sometimes wished she had a small dog that would let her be sad. Despite her fears, she kept recording—at the end of "For Her," she'd multitracked her voice to form a gospel-like chorus singing, "You were so high"—and said that she wanted the final result to be uncompromising. "I want primary colors," she said. "I don't want any half measures."

We listened to "Heavy Balloon," a gorgeous, propulsive song about depression. She had added a new second verse, partly inspired by the scene of Alison drowning: "We get dragged down, down to the same spot enough times in a row/The bottom begins to feel like the only safe place that you know." Apple, curling up on the floor, explained, "It's almost like you get Stockholm syndrome with your own depression—like you're kidnapped by your own depression." Her voice got soft. "People with depression are always playing with this thing that's very heavy," she said. Her arms went up, as if she were bouncing a balloon, pretending to have fun, and said, "Like, 'Ha, ha, it's so *heavy!*'" Then we had to stop, because she was having a panic attack.

Apple has tried all kinds of cures. She was sent to a family therapist at the age of eleven, when, mad at her sister, she glibly remarked, on a school trip, that she planned to kill herself and take Amber with her. After she was raped, she spent hours at a Model Mugging class, practicing self-defense by punching a man in a padded suit. In 2011, she attended eight weeks of silent Buddhist retreats, meditating from 5 A.M. to 9 P.M., with no eye contact—it was part of a plan to become less isolated. She had a wild breakthrough one day, in which the world lit up, showing her a pulsing space between the people at the retreat—a suggestion of something larger. That vision is evoked in the new song "I Want You to Love Me," in which Apple sings, with raspy fervor, of wanting to get "back in the pulse."

She tried a method for treating P.T.S.D. called eye-movement desensitization and reprocessing therapy, and—around the time she poured her vodka down the drain, in 2018—an untested

technique called "brain balancing." Articles about neurological anomalies fascinated her. The first day we met, Apple spread printouts of brain scans on the floor of her studio, pointing to blue and pink shapes. She was seeking patterns, just as she often did on Tumblr, reposting images, doing rabbit-hole searches that she knew were a form of magical thinking.

Apple doesn't consider herself an alcoholic, but for years she drank vodka alone, every night, until she passed out. When she'd walk by the freezer, she'd reach for a sip; for her, the first step toward sobriety was simply being conscious of that impulse. She had quit cocaine years earlier, after spending "one excruciating night" at Quentin Tarantino's house, listening to him and Anderson brag. "Every addict should just get locked in a private movie theatre with Q.T. and P.T.A. on coke, and they'll never want to do it again," she joked. She loved getting loose on wine, but not the regret that followed. Her father has been sober for decades, but when Apple was a little kid he was a turbulent alcoholic. He hit bottom when he had a violent confrontation with a Manhattan cabdriver; Apple was only four, but she remembers his bloody face, the nurse at the hospital. When I visited Apple's mother at her Manhattan apartment, she showed me a photo album with pictures of Apple as a child. One image was captioned "Fiona had too much wine—not feeling good," with a scribbled sad face. Apple, at two, had wandered around an adult party, drinking the dregs.

For decades, Apple has taken prescription psychopharmaceuticals. She told me that she'd been given a diagnosis of "complex developmental post-traumatic stress disorder." (It was such a satisfyingly multisyllabic phrase that she preferred to sing it, transforming it into a ditty.) In December, she began having mood swings, with symptoms bad enough that she was told to get an MRI, to rule out a pituitary tumor. In the end, Apple said, she had to wean herself off an antipsychotic that she had been prescribed for her night terrors; the dosage, she said, had been way too high. As she recovered, she felt troubled, sometimes, by a sense of flatness: if she couldn't feel the emotion in the songs, she said, she wouldn't be able to tell what worked.

Earlier that fall, she had given an interview to the Web site Vulture, in which she was brassy and perceptive. People responded enthusiastically—many young women saw in Apple a gutsy iconoclast who'd shrugged off the world's demands. She won praise, too, for having donated a year's worth of profits from "Criminal"—which J. Lo dances to in the recent movie "Hustlers"—to immigrant criminal-defense cases. But the positive response also threw her, she realized. "Even the best circumstances of being in public may be too much," she told me.

By January, the situation was better. Apple was no longer having nightmares, although she was still worried, at times, by her moods. One layer of self-protection had been removed when she stopped using alcohol, she said; another was lost with the reduction in medication. And, although she was enthusiastic about some new mixes, she felt apprehensive. She could listen to the tracks, but only through headphones.

So we talked about the subject that made her feel best: the dog rescues she was funding. She paid her brother Bran to pick up the dogs across the country, then drive them to L.A., for placement in foster homes. She and Hallman followed along through videos that Bran sent them. The dogs had been through terrible experiences: one was raped by humans; another was beaten with a shovel. Apple felt that she should not flinch from these details. Rebecca Corry, of Stand Up for Pits, had given her advice for coping: "You have to celebrate small victories and remember their faces and move on to the next one."

Then, one day, Apple's band came to her house to listen to the latest mixes. The next afternoon, her face was glowing again. She had wondered if the meeting would be awkward—if the band might disagree on what edits to make. Instead, she and Amy Aileen Wood kept glancing at each other, ecstatic, as they had all the same responses. At last, Apple could listen to the album on speakers.

Afterward, I texted Wood. "Dare I say it was magical?!" Wood wrote. "Everything is sounding so damn good!" Steinberg told me that the notes were simple: "Get out of the way of the music" and let Apple's voice dominate. Apple knew what she wanted, he said. He described his job as helping her to recognize "that she was her own Svengali."

It reminded me of a story that Bran had told me, about working in construction. One day, when he was twenty-eight, he strolled out onto a beam suspended thirty-five feet in the air—a task that he'd done many times. Suddenly, he was frozen, terrified of falling. Yet all he had to do was touch something—any object at all—to break the spell. "Because you're grounded, you can just touch a leaf on a tree and walk," he said.

Seeing her band again had grounded Apple. She felt a renewed bravado. She'd made plans to rerelease "When the Pawn . . ." on vinyl, but with the original artwork, by Paul Thomas Anderson, swapped out. "That's just a great album," she told me. Looking back on her catalogue, she thought that her one weak song might be "Please Please Please," on "Extraordinary Machine," which she wrote only because the record company had demanded another track: "Please, please, please, no more melodies."

In the next few weeks, she sent updates: she was considering potential video directors; she was brainstorming ideas for album art, like a sketch of Harvey Weinstein with his walker. She'd even gone out to see King Princess perform. One night, after petting Janet's skull and talking to her, Apple went into her old bedroom: she was able to sleep on the futon again, with Mercy. She'd also got a new tattoo, of a black bolt cutter, running down her right forearm.

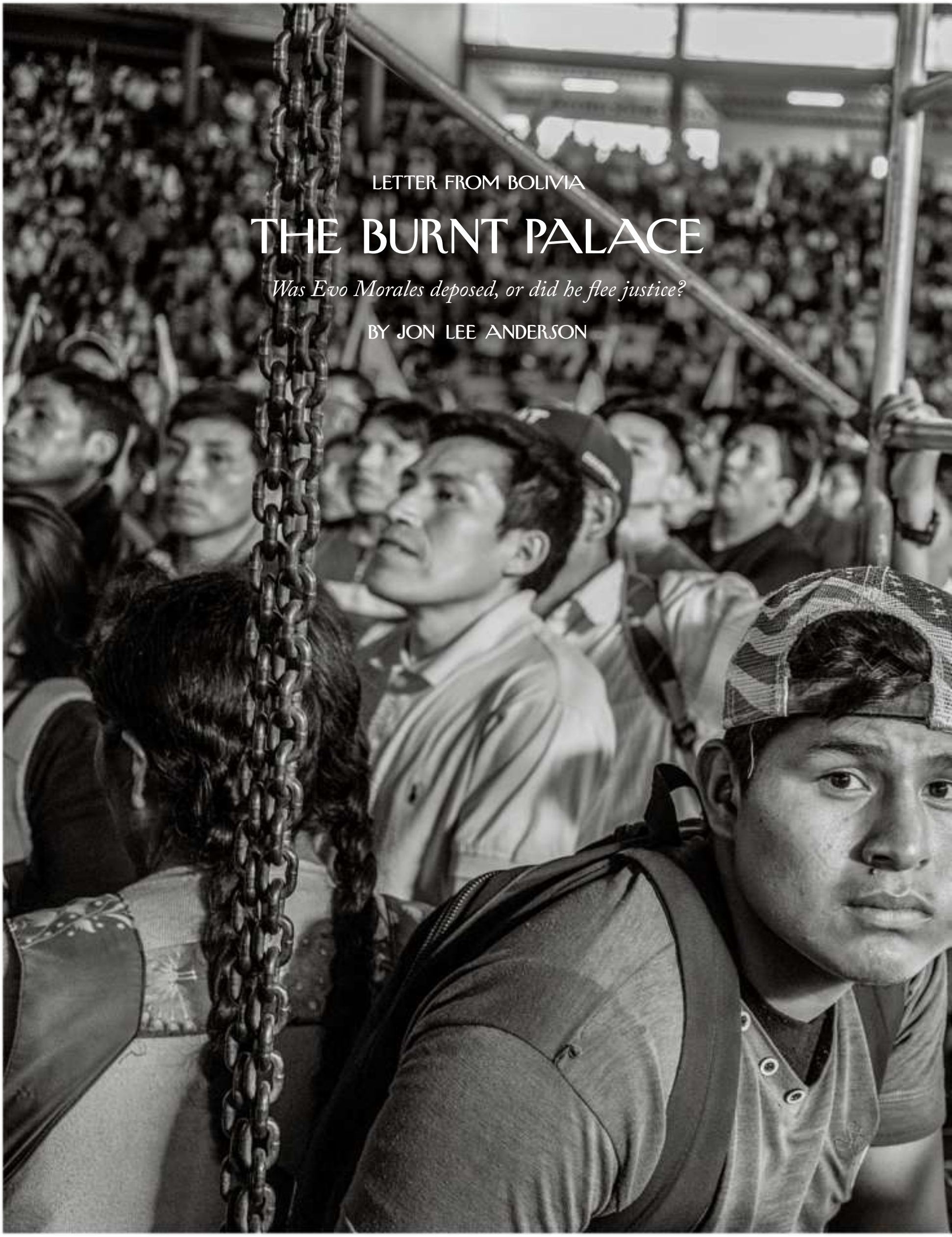
On the day that Jonathan Ames came over, Apple had pondered the exact nature of her work. Maybe, she suggested, she was like any other artist whose body is an instrument—a ballerina who wears her feet out or a sculptor who strains his back. Maybe she, too, wore herself out. Maybe that's why she had to take time to heal in between projects. In "On I Go," the first song she'd written for "Fetch the Bolt Cutters," she chanted about trying to lead a life guided by inner, rather than outer, impulses: "On I go, not toward or away/Up until now it was day, next day/Up until now in a rush to prove/But now I only move to move." In the middle of the track, she screwed up the beat for a second and said, "Ah, fuck, shit." It was a moment almost anyone making a final edit would smooth out. She left it in. ♦

LETTER FROM BOLIVIA

THE BURNT PALACE

Was Evo Morales deposed, or did he flee justice?

BY JON LEE ANDERSON



Morales's charismatic populism has continued to galvanize supporters even while the former President is in exile. At a recent rally

organized by his political party, the Movement Toward Socialism, the crowd cheered, "Evo, you are not alone!"

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MOISES SAMAN

Outside a sports stadium in Cochabamba, Bolivia, three men stood on a plinth, tearing down a statue of Evo Morales, who until a few weeks before had been the country's President. One man diligently whacked away with a sledgehammer, while another shoved at the statue's head—crowned, like the man it portrays, with a mushroom-shaped mullet that is distinctive among world leaders. Finally, the statue came loose, and with a contemptuous heave the men threw it to the ground. The sports minister of the new government, who had helped with the demolition, told reporters afterward that stadiums shouldn't be named for delinquents.

Morales had fled Bolivia in November, after he was accused of trying to steal an election, and the country's military chief publicly suggested that he resign. Since then, Bolivia had been fiercely, sometimes violently divided. Many people spoke of a coup, but there was enduring disagreement over whether it had been perpetrated by Morales or by his opponents. Whoever was to blame, his departure brought an abrupt end to one of Latin America's most remarkable Presidencies. The son of impoverished llama herders, Morales was an ethnic Aymara, the first indigenous President in a majority-indigenous country. Although he left school before college and speaks in rough, heavily accented Spanish, he managed to hold power for almost fourteen years. He was a protégé of Fidel Castro, and perhaps the last surviving exponent of the Pink Tide—the leftist leaders who dominated Latin America's politics for more than a decade. During his time in office, he transformed Bolivia, reducing poverty by almost half and tripling the G.D.P.

Evo, as everyone calls him, is a sturdy, youthful-looking man of sixty, who prides himself on outlasting opponents in soccer matches in Bolivia's Andean high altitudes. (During one game, in 2010, he was captured on video deliberately kneeing a distracted opponent in the groin.) As recently as last year, he claimed to stay fit by doing more than a thousand sit-ups a day. In the Presidency, he was tireless, beginning his workday at 4:45 A.M. and continuing late into the evening. A charismatic populist, he could also be arrogant and divisive, given to crass and at times eccentric proclamations. On one occasion, he suggested that eating genetically modified chicken made people gay. On another, he had the Congress building equipped with a "Clock of the South," with hands that spun to the left, to symbolize Bolivia's efforts to "decolonize" itself. A longtime leader of the coca growers' union, Morales used his office to expound the medicinal properties of the plant; behind the Presidential desk, he hung a portrait of Che Guevara, made out of coca leaves.

After Morales's contested election, several of his highest-ranking officials resigned along with him, including the three people after him in the line of Presidential succession. The office was claimed by a member of the conservative opposition: Jeanine Áñez, a fifty-two-year-old former television presenter, who was then serving in the largely ceremonial post of second vice-president of the Senate. Within two days, Áñez had been endorsed by the military and proclaimed herself President, donning the sash of office as generals looked on approvingly. She alienated the indigenous population just as quickly, leading a scrum of followers to the Presidential palace, where she raised an outsized Bible and declared that she was "returning the Bible to the palace." Áñez, a light-skinned blond woman, made things worse by naming an all-white cabinet. Following an outcry, she added

an indigenous minister, but by then Morales's loyalists had branded her "*la mujer teñida*" ("the dyed woman") or, simply, "the whore."

In office, Áñez signed a decree prohibiting "personality cults" in Bolivia's institutions, and made it clear that she intended to purge Morales's legacy and his presence from public life. A Presidential employee told me that Áñez had toured Morales's former offices, accompanied by a man dressed in native robes and another carrying a Bible. While she prayed before portraits of Bolivia's national heroes, the robed man blew a horn, as if to chase off evil spirits. The employee told me that when Áñez encountered the coca-leaf portrait of Che she grew visibly upset and ordered it removed.

Áñez and her allies argued that Morales had turned the country into a socialist autocracy, and that only by removing him could it heal. Morales, from exile in Mexico, insisted that he had created modern Bolivia—that the nation effectively didn't exist without him. When I spoke to him this winter, in one of a series of conversations, Morales described Bolivia's tradition of political instability. In a hundred and ninety-five years as an independent republic, it has seen no fewer than a hundred and ninety revolutions and coups; Morales's ouster was arguably the latest one. "They said my government was authoritarian because I was President for a long time," he told me. "They called me 'Dictator Evo Morales,' but now the Bolivian people can see what it's like to live in a dictatorship, what it is to live with a coup d'état." Morales argued that he should be allowed to come back and finish his term. Failing that, he assured me, his bloc—the Movement Toward Socialism, or MAS—would resume control of Bolivia one way or another. "I will return, and we will be millions," he said. He was paraphrasing the last words of one of his heroes, the eighteenth-century anti-colonial rebel Túpac Katari, just before he was pulled to pieces by four Spanish horses.

One afternoon, as I waited outside the Presidential palace to meet Áñez, a young man walked up and ostentatiously spat on the ground next to me. He seemed, perhaps understandably, to have mistaken me for an American official, there to assist the new regime.

It was early December, three weeks after the collapse of Morales's government, and Bolivia remained polarized. In the wealthier neighborhoods of La Paz, the graffiti called Morales an assassin, a dictator, a narco; in the poorer, more indigenous districts, slogans proclaimed "Evo Sí" and "Áñez Fascista." Two blocks from the palace was a spray-painted message, "Alert: They are killing us," which could have come from either camp.

The Palacio Quemado, or Burnt Pal-

ace, as it is known, earned its name in 1875, when an angry mob torched it in an attempted coup. Its replacement, a pink-and-white neocolonial structure, has survived intact, but in 1946 the reformist President Gualberto Villarroel was murdered there in another mob attack, his body hurled from a balcony and then hanged from a street lamp in the plaza below. The street lamp still stands, flanked by a plaque commemorating Villarroel's death. The plaza, a quiet place with shade trees and balloon venders, is named for Pedro Domingo Murillo, a Creole patriot who sparked Bolivia's war of independence against Spain, in 1809. Soon afterward, he was captured by royalist troops and hanged.

As if to repudiate this ugly history, Morales built a skyscraper, called the Great House of the People, to serve as a headquarters for his "democratic and cultural revolution." A gleaming rectangle of glass and steel, the Great House rises twenty-nine stories above the old palace, and contains the Presidential offices and living quarters, along with several government ministries. Morales's political opponents criticized the construction, which cost some thirty-four million dollars, as an extravagant vanity project. After he fled, the new communications minister led a press tour of his chambers, which she derided as "worthy of an Arab sheikh." News photographs showed a spacious but rather sterile bedroom and a marble-lined bathroom with a Jacuzzi—a nice place, but not much more luxurious than a Sheraton Four Points.

Áñez had rejected the Great House and installed herself in the Palacio Quemado. I waited for her there in a receiving room, watched over by a gilt-framed portrait of Simon Bolívar, the country's namesake. As Áñez and her entourage arrived, a soldier and a plainclothes bodyguard took up protective positions: one behind her, the other by a window overlooking the plaza. A man in a business suit introduced himself as Erick Foronda, Áñez's private secretary. When I said that he looked familiar, he deadpanned, "That must be because I am a C.I.A. agent." Foronda had been an adviser at the U.S. Embassy in La Paz for more than two decades. Morales, who often accused the U.S. of covertly meddling in Bolivia, expelled the American Ambassador and the Drug Enforcement Administration in 2008, and the U.S. Agency for International Development in 2013. That year, Morales claimed that, while he was returning from an official visit to Russia, the U.S. government ordered his Presidential jet diverted to Vienna, on the suspicion that he was sneaking Edward Snowden into Bolivia with him. (He wasn't.)

During the first two years of the Trump Administration, Foronda lived in Washington. Now Morales's allies were portraying his presence in the palace as indisputable evidence that the U.S. had supported a coup. In January, Radio Habana Cuba ran a story titled "Áñez's Private Secretary Insures the Subordination of Bolivia to Washington." Although the story was full of implausible assertions—it suggested that the U.S. had forced out Morales in order to secure Bolivia's supply of lithium—Áñez's government was unabashedly right-wing. She had swiftly expelled Venezuelan diplomats and Cuban doctors, accusing them of financing pro-Morales mobs. The first ruler to congratulate her on her Presidency was Brazil's far-right leader, Jair Bolsonaro; the second was Donald Trump. (In the U.S., left-leaning sympathizers such as Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez decried what they saw as a coup.)

"I'm not a metaphor."

• •

The palace was chilly during our meeting, and Áñez wore a black coat over a black dress. She spoke in a soft but firm voice, explaining that she had a sore throat from talking too much. What happened in Bolivia, she said, had been a "liberation" from Morales's politics of class division and hatred. "This was fourteen years of dictatorship, fourteen years of lies, fourteen years of oppression, from which we are trying to free Bolivians, to bring about a transition that can become a new starting point, a place where no one prohibits us from thinking differently," she said.

I asked Áñez if her appearance with the Bible at the Palacio Quemado might have alarmed Morales's loyalists by signalling her allegiance to the far right. "I am a woman who is close to the Bible, and I am close to God," she said fervently. "If that means I am an ultra-rightist, then I must be one." She asserted that more than eighty per cent of Bolivians were also "people of faith," and accused Morales of "not believing in

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God," and of having "other beliefs," a comment that echoed an old tweet, since deleted, in which she denigrated Aymara religious beliefs as "satanic."

Áñez assured me that she had never expected to become President: "It was something God put in my path." But, she added, since she had taken the job Bolivia had become more stable, and the necessary political transition was taking effect. Although "many Bolivians" had told her they appreciated her efforts, she had no plans to run in the next elections, which were planned for May. She saw herself as "an instrument" in the task of "pacifying and stabilizing" the country.

Despite Áñez's talk of peace, there was a palpable sense that an ideological purge was under way. Her interior minister, Arturo Murillo, had vowed to "hunt down" his predecessor, Juan Ramón Quintana, who had taken refuge in the Mexican Embassy. (Murillo was known for harsh talk; as a senator, he had once said that women had no right to receive an abortion, though they should feel free to "kill themselves by throwing themselves out of a fifth-floor window.") If there was any suspicion that his hunting metaphor was a figure of speech, he dispelled it by describing Quintana as "an animal" that "feeds on the blood of the people." Murillo also promised to pursue Morales for being a "narcoterrorist." Áñez made the same charge, and told me that Morales would have to face justice if he ever returned to Bolivia.

When I first spoke to Morales, in a telephone call two days after his arrival in Mexico, he insisted that he was the victim of a conspiracy, in which oligarchs in Bolivia were abetted by imperialists in the U.S. "*They* don't forgive me, because I nationalized the natural resources," he said. "*They* don't forgive me, because I reduced extreme poverty. In the capitalist system, the idea is that if you're poor you should look after yourself, and there won't be any social problems. But that doesn't work in Bolivia." As he had done many times before, Morales accused his enemies of racism, saying that they couldn't bear the fact that an "*indio*" had been President.

Morales likes to say that he did not just lead the country—he "refounded" it. Since the days of the Spanish occupation, Bolivia had been effectively two countries: one indigenous and mostly rural, the other white and mostly urban. During Morales's first term, he pushed through a new constitution that changed the country's name from the Republic of Bolivia to the Plurinational State of Bolivia, to reflect its "communal and social" diversity. He adopted the indigenous symbol the *wiphala*—a checkerboard of bright colors, meant to represent Bolivia's many peoples—as a national emblem, equal to the flag. At state functions, he wore a collarless alpaca-wool suit, accented with vivid Aymara embroidery.

The revamped constitution also changed Morales's electoral fortunes. Bolivia's Presidents had been forbidden to serve consecutive terms, but a new provision allowed two in a row. In 2013, as Morales approached the two-term limit, he convinced the courts that his first term, which came before the constitution was amended, shouldn't count toward his total; the following year, he won office again. In 2016, he tried yet another gambit: he held a referendum asking Bolivians to override the constitution and allow him a fourth term. The voters narrowly rejected his request, but the country's constitutional court obligingly ruled that to prohibit Morales from running would violate his human rights. In 2018, an even more pliant body, the supreme electoral court, ratified the verdict.

Many Bolivians were incensed, and the opposition held protests. But Morales retained widespread support, especially among poor and indigenous citizens. Last October 20th, he stood for reëlection, and felt confident about his chances. His opponent was Carlos Mesa, a former journalist who had twice had his career disrupted by Morales. Mesa had served as Vice-President from 2002 until 2003, when the sitting President fled the country, amid violent protests that stemmed from his privatization of natural-gas reserves—a conflict known as the Bolivian Gas War. Mesa became President, only to resign as well as the dispute continued. Both times, Morales was a prominent leader of the opposition.

On Election Day, early results showed Morales ahead by about seven points, but he needed a ten-point lead to avoid a second round of voting. That evening, with eighty-four per cent of the vote counted, the electronic tally was suddenly halted; when it resumed, twenty-four hours later, Morales had secured a margin of just over ten per cent. Mesa and his supporters erupted into accusations of fraud, and they soon convened nationwide strikes to demand new elections.

Both Morales and his opponents refused to give way, snarling the country in protests and counter-protests. Finally, Morales agreed to allow the Organization of American States to investigate the election, and on November 10th the O.A.S. published its findings. The auditors said bluntly that "serious irregularities" had occurred, mostly in Morales's favor, and recommended that a new election be held. Morales quickly acknowledged the report and announced his support for a new vote. But, before that could happen, Bolivia's armed-forces chief, Williams Kaliman, appeared before television cameras to "suggest" that Morales resign, "for the good of Bolivia." The commander of the national police echoed his call.

Morales understood that his Presidency had come to an end. Police units around the country had mutinied, and Presidential guards had abandoned their posts. In the hangar that contained the Presidential jet, Morales held a press conference, and tendered his resignation in a frowning, hurried statement. Then he and a few close aides flew to his rural stronghold, in the coca-growing region of Chapare. After he sent word to his followers to assemble at the airport there, thousands showed up to protect him from possible arrest. The next day, Morales tweeted a photograph of himself in a safe house. It showed him lying on a blanket on a concrete floor.

For twenty-four hours, Morales remained out of sight, while Andrés Manuel López Obrador, the left-of-center Mexican President, dispatched a jet to fly him to safety. Mexico's foreign minister, Marcelo Ebrard, had made it clear that his government regarded Morales as the legitimate President of Bolivia, who had been toppled in a military coup. When Morales landed in Mexico, Ebrard greeted him in a warm embrace. Later, he told me that Morales had expressed fear that if he didn't flee the country he would be killed.

In the chaos around Morales's resignation, the leaders of MAS made a

grievous political error when the three highest-ranking officials also resigned. Their gesture was interpreted as a protest, but, by resigning, they vacated the line of succession for the Presidency. As a result, Áñez, whose party had won just four per cent of the vote in the previous election, was able to declare herself president of the Senate—and thus next in line to lead Bolivia.

Áñez took charge of a country in tumult. Morales's opponents had raucously celebrated his departure, waving Bolivia's tricolored flag in the street. On Twitter, Carlos Mesa hailed "the end of the tyranny." Others had attacked Morales's lieutenants and vandalized their homes. A mob looted a house that Morales owned in Cochabamba, and set fire to one owned by his sister. In Potosí, the brother of MAS's congressional leader was stripped naked and paraded around the main square, while his house was torched. Another opposition mob grabbed the mayor of a town near Cochabamba, cut off her hair, doused her in red paint, and marched her through the streets while beating her.

Morales's supporters had clashed with police; others burned and looted businesses and the homes of some of his prominent critics. Mobs set fire to sixty-eight buses in La Paz, and snipers fired on a caravan of pro-opposition miners, wounding several. Others blockaded the roads leading to Bolivian cities, cutting off supplies of food and fuel.

On November 12th, the day that Áñez took office, she deployed the police and the Army, and soon offered immunity for any crimes they might commit in their efforts to reassert social control. Within days, the security forces were involved in two massacres of Morales supporters. On the fifteenth, a group of militant *cocaleros*, marching in support of Morales, approached police lines on a bridge in the town of Sacaba, and nine were killed by gunfire. Three days later, in the Aymara city of El Alto, Morales supporters blockaded a state-owned gas-storage facility called Senkata. Security forces opened fire, killing at least ten.

Áñez's government maintained that the security forces had averted a "terrorist attack" at Senkata. Officials claimed that the demonstrators had intended to blow up gas holding tanks, causing as many as fifty thousand deaths. But investigators for the O.A.S. rejected this explanation. A MAS organizer who was there that day told me that the demonstrators had wanted to "gain attention," so they dug trenches in the dirt road outside the facility, to halt fuel trucks. But the government had dispatched bulldozers to fill the ditches, so they had thrown rocks at the bulldozers, and then soldiers had begun shooting. "That woman has lied," the organizer said, of Áñez. "She said we were carrying firearms, but that's an infuriating lie."

Morales likes to say that he did not just lead Bolivia—he "refounded" it.

By the time Bolivia's unrest subsided, at the end of November, thirty-four people were dead and hundreds had been injured. Arturo Murillo, the new interior minister, told me that Áñez's administration bore no responsibility. "Out of all of the dead in the country—and each of them pains us—there is not any sign that one of them was caused by the government," he said. "The majority are dead from a .22-calibre bullet in the back of the head, or else in the back, or under the arm. What does this mean? This means that the people of MAS, those who stirred up the unrest, killed these people to get things going."

Murillo has provided no evidence for his claims. It is true that Morales's followers committed violence. (Morales himself argued that they had been provoked by policemen ripping *wiphala*

badges from their uniforms and burning them. "Naturally, a great uprising is under way to restore the honor of our patriotic symbols," he said.) But they accounted for only a handful of deaths—roughly equal to the number of Morales supporters killed by opposition mobs. The security forces killed at least nineteen people, and reports suggest that the total could be considerably larger.

Amid the violence, nine senior officials took refuge in the Mexican Embassy in La Paz, while others with links to Morales fled the country. When I asked Murillo about reports of persecution of MAS members, he grew testy. "We aren't going after just anybody—just the terrorists, seditious people, those who want to hurt our country," he said, his voice rising to a menacing shout. "We are going to persecute them, with a very hard hand." He went on, "What is persecuting them most is their own conscience, no? They know they've killed, they know they've burned. They know they've stolen and they know they've cheated the people. There are many that have to pay a debt to the fatherland. And debts are paid, sooner or later."

In Murillo's view, the person who owed the greatest debt to Bolivia was Evo Morales. He said that his intelligence services had uncovered evidence that Morales had turned the country into a "narcoterrorist state." He spoke of Venezuelan agents sent in as terrorist provocateurs, part of a vast hemispheric conspiracy run out of Cuba. Drug arrests had increased since Morales left, he said, showing that his administration had "only detained those who weren't friends with the government." Murillo said, "We're going to do everything we can so that he pays for his crimes in prison."

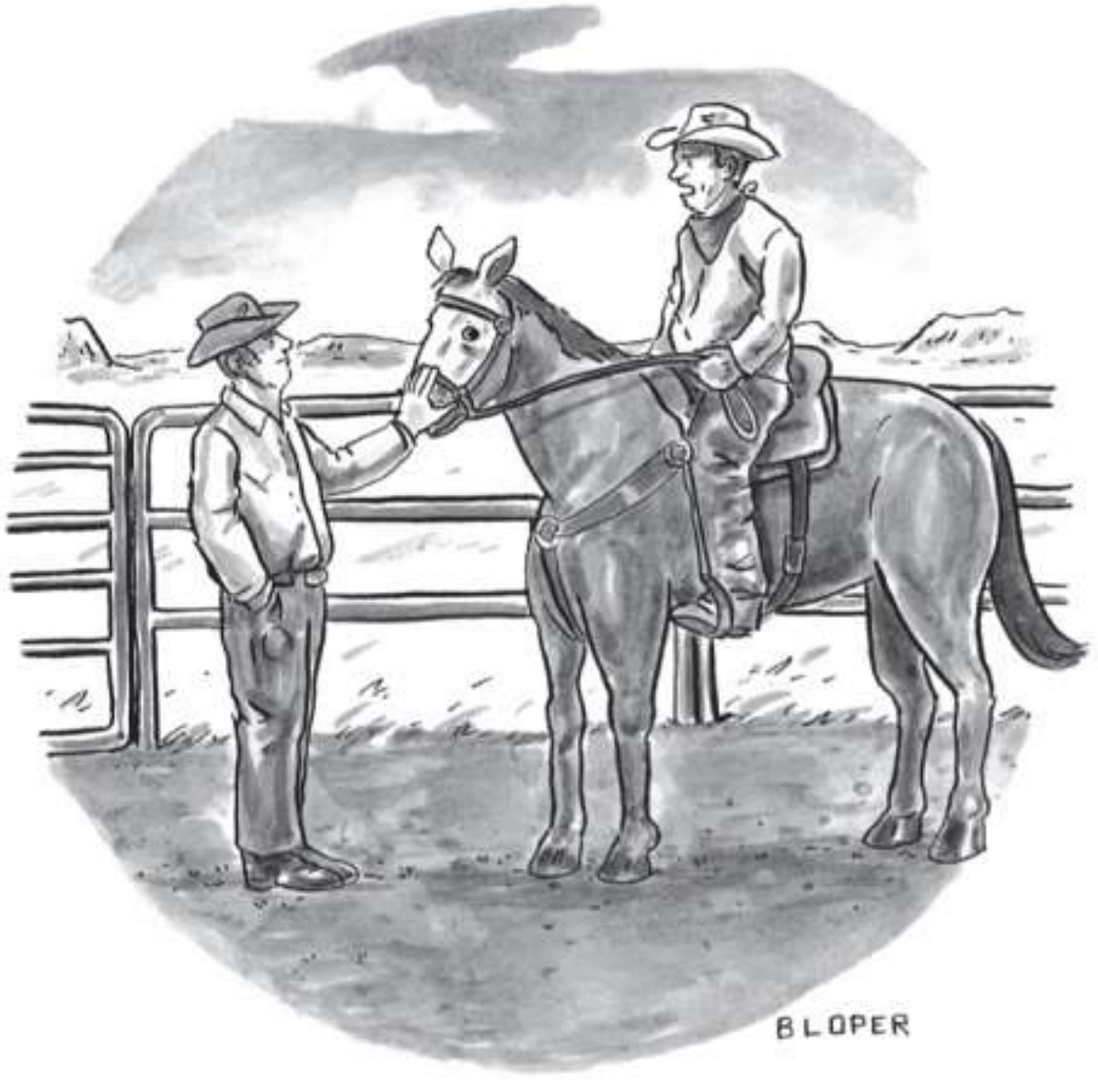
In December, Áñez's attorney general accused Morales of sedition and terrorism, and asked Interpol to issue a warrant for his arrest. As evidence, the government released a recording of a phone call, allegedly made during the crisis, in which Morales could be heard ordering a union leader to tighten the MAS blockade. "No food should be getting into the cities," he said. "Let's block them, really cut them off."

When I met Morales in Mexico City, later that month, he waved away the news of the Interpol warrant. "*They* have done everything to me that's possible to do," he said, laughing dismissively. When he was a *cocalero* leader and a congressman, the government had tortured him and imprisoned him for his activism. "What more can they do—throw me in jail?" he said. "I've been there already."

Morales was being housed on a Mexican military base with restricted access, so we met instead at a villa that doubled as the headquarters of the Venezuelan state television station. We sat under a tree in a small walled garden. Morales, dressed in a wool jacket and chinos, spoke volubly but wore a watchful expression. He seemed unable to conceive of a life away from Bolivia, especially one in which he no longer had a role in steering its destiny.

When Morales became President, many people in the business community feared that he would install an uncompromising revolutionary regime. In his office, a painting of the Aymara guerrilla Túpac Katari hung on the wall, along with portraits of Fidel Castro and Nelson Mandela. Instead, his administration had focussed on development. Morales explained to me that, early in his political life, "I once had a long meeting with Comandante Fidel Castro." From midnight until five or six in the morning, Castro lectured him about social policies, as Morales grew increasingly bored. "Finally, I dared to ask him, 'Fidel, where do you buy weapons from for the revolution?' And he said, 'Evo, no, no, no!'" Instead of armed insurrection, Castro wanted him to concentrate on education and health. "It made me think," Morales said.

Morales pointed out that, in 1978, the year he performed his compulsory military service, there were three different Presidents, and the following year there were four. "Without political stability, it was impossible to think of developing Bolivia," he said. Under his administration, he boasted, "we became the first country in economic growth in all of South America. Before, Bolivia had only ever been first in poverty and corruption." He nationalized the country's natural resources, and tried to bring



"I broke him, but now he wants to pursue a career in standup."

them to market. "When I came to government, Bolivia didn't export L.P. gas," a form of liquid petroleum. "It imported it." Now Bolivia exported gas to Paraguay, Peru, Brazil, and Argentina. "Before, Bolivia imported fertilizer, but now we export three hundred and fifty thousand tons a year to Brazil," he went on. "For a small country of ten million people, that's something—it's an income."

Like other leftist leaders in the region, Morales had benefitted from a decade-long boom in natural resources. Unlike some others, notably in Venezuela, he hadn't destroyed his country's economy by going to war with the private sector. His opposition—a mostly white, conservative establishment centered in the city of Santa Cruz—made several early attempts to oust him, ranging from nationwide strikes to a conspiracy to hire mercenaries to assassinate him. But Morales proved willing to work with capitalists, as long as they didn't oppose him politically.

In La Paz, the effect of Evo's pragmatism was visible everywhere. The Bolivian capital sits in a yawning crater in the Andean altiplano, more than twelve thousand feet above sea level. During the past two decades, the city has boomed. In the slums that cover the sides of the crater, the old adobe houses have been replaced by red brick, and colorful cable cars whiz overhead, ferrying passengers up and down the mountainsides. In the much expanded southern suburbs, where most of the more affluent, and whiter, *paceños* live, prosperous-looking teens shuttle between a United Colors of Benetton and a Burger King. In Calacoto, a neighborhood with walled villas and luxury hotels, a travel agency advertised trips to Disney World.

To ease inequality, Morales poured money into a universal basic pension, and started cash-transfer systems that encouraged pregnant women to seek health care and families to keep children in school. His government distributed packages of food (with his picture on them) and built hospitals and schools (with his name on them). His efforts were often theatrical—he liked to visit impoverished towns and hand out money to children—but they were effective.

Still, the goals of economic growth and social uplift fitted together uneasily. In La Paz, I met with Waldo Albarracín, the former rector of the country's leading public university and a longtime human-rights advocate. Albarracín was an early supporter of Morales. "I voted for Evo," he said. "Most of us who considered ourselves leftists did." But he had come to see his Presidency as a missed opportunity. "The commodities boom generated an income of more than forty billion dollars," he said. "The country had never seen revenues like that before." International lenders, including the World Bank and the I.M.F., agreed to eliminate more than half of Bolivia's foreign debt. "That would have been a good time to open up the economy further," Albarracín said. Instead, Morales had deepened his commitment to mining, gas, and agribusiness. The left grew frustrated by his emphasis on business and his lack of interest in environmental prerogatives. Then the commodities boom sputtered. "Not only was there a slowdown of economic growth but there were corruption issues, much like those of any government of the right," Albarracín said. "Meanwhile, Evo carried on talking like an anti-imperialist." Albarracín, like others, became a harsh critic, and eventually his old comrades turned on him. During the unrest in November, hundreds of MAS activists converged on his house, on a quiet side street of La Paz, and set it on fire.

In Mexico City, when I pushed Morales to take some responsibility for the debacle in November, he said, airily, "We are human beings, and we all make mistakes. But can it really be said that it's a mistake to go to an *election*? In my second term, after we had refounded Bolivia, my brothers of the countryside as well as my brothers of the city came and said to me, 'Your life no longer depends on yourself—it depends on the people.' They told me I *had* to stand again, to continue with the process of change."

As we spoke, I became aware that a young woman was listening to us from a chair a dozen feet away. She had straight dark hair in pigtails, and she was dressed in jeans and a black T-shirt, with the word "LOVE" in sparkly white letters. She and Morales occasionally exchanged glances and smiled. At one point, Morales interrupted our conversation to tell my photographer not to take pictures of the woman. Later, as Morales posed for photographs, she asked me to take her portrait using her phone. She stood with her back to the garden wall, giggling playfully at Morales, who was posing a few feet away.

Morales once declared that he had "no time for a wife or children" because he was "married to Bolivia," but in fact he has a daughter and a son, both in their mid-twenties, born to different women. Another of his lovers was involved in a scheme in which a Chinese firm secured five hundred million dollars' worth of contracts from Morales's government; in 2016, she was sentenced to prison for "illicit enrichment." Morales was never charged, but his connection with the woman proved embarrassing, as reports claimed that he had got her pregnant. Although no child ever appeared in public, Morales inflamed speculation by claiming that the baby had died, while the woman insisted that he was alive.

Even as aides tried to quiet concerns about Morales's personal life, he had caused a small scandal by declaring that, after retiring from politics, he planned to settle down on a farm "with my *cato de coca*, my *quinceañera*, and my *charango*"—a coca field, a fifteen-year-old girl, and an Andean guitar.

In Mexico, Morales seemed insulated from the reality of his situation and oddly unaware of the impression he made. Many MAS loyalists I spoke to complained that he had been increasingly imperious as he extended his time in office, but that aides protected him from consequences. Marcela Araúz, a former communications director for Bolivia's Congress, said that he had been surrounded by *llunkus*, or "ass-lickers," who had brought about the crisis by abetting his "despotic tendencies." Waldo Albarracín listed offensive incidents. In 2010, Morales bought a new Presidential jet, for thirty-eight million dollars. "He wanted to watch the World Cup, so he took his plane and his entourage with him," Albarracín said. "Idi Amin-style

Jeanine Áñez, the interim President, says that she brought "liberation."

tastes!" In 2011, Morales tried to push a highway through an indigenous reserve in the tropical lowland, inspiring protests so intense that the government had been forced to back down. Last summer, forest fires blazed through eastern Bolivia, ravaging the wilderness known as La Chiquitania. For weeks, Morales sat idle, refusing to accept international aid and blocking Argentine firefighters from entering the country. By the time the fires subsided, more than four million acres of forest had been scorched.

In La Paz, I visited Morales's former office, which suggested a serene remove from the details of governance. His desk was entirely bare. In contrast, the adjoining office of his Vice-President, Alvaro García Linera, looked as if he never went home. The desk overflowed with reports and papers, and a suit hung from a hook on a filing cabinet. Crayon drawings by a young child were taped to the window.

I met García Linera in a park next to Avenida Reforma, Mexico City's grand central boulevard. A slim, silver-haired man of fifty-seven, he was dressed in a neatly cut business suit. His looks are deceptive: a Marxist theoretician, he once spent five years in prison for his involvement in the revolutionary Túpac Katari Guerrilla Army. Conservative Bolivians despised García Linera, a university-educated white man, as a traitor to their class. MAS partisans blamed him for abetting Morales's excesses; militants suspected him of colonialist sympathies. Everyone suspected that he was the real brains behind Morales.

García Linera hoped that the "de-facto regime" of Áñez would soon be gone, so that MAS could resume the projects that he and Morales had left unfinished. But he would not risk returning home anytime soon—not openly, anyway. When I asked whether it had been a mistake for him and Morales to seek a fourth term, he held my gaze for a long moment, and said, "I'm sure we made lots of mistakes, but I think that now is not the right time to discuss them in public."

One evening, I walked across the plaza outside Palacio Quemado to Bolivia's legislature, where Morales's Clock of the South was still ticking away in reverse. Inside, I met with Eva Copa, the president of the Senate. Copa, an ethnic Aymara from El Alto, is thirty-three, with black hair and glasses. A backbench politician with only five years' experience, she was asked by her party to fill in after all the senior officials departed. She had assumed a role resembling that of her American equivalent Nancy Pelosi, having to work with a government to which she was deeply opposed.

After Morales's fall, MAS had retained the majority in the legislature, but, in early December, it began negotiating with the Áñez administration. Copa discreetly made it clear to me that her decision to work with "*la señora* Áñez" had been unpopular with the more militant members. But, Copa explained, she had seen no other way to end the crisis, and ordinary Bolivians were suffering; she herself had young children, and, at the height of the violence, the MAS blockade had kept her from going home to see them for two weeks. She did not directly criticize Morales, nor did she mention him much. Later, a former senior MAS official confided, "The quest for a fourth term was a mistake, and this is the consequence. We all know it. They are going to make us pay for it in the next elections, too. We're just going to have to learn from our mistakes, and hope to survive."

Jerjes Justiniano, who served as Áñez's

chief of staff during the transition period, said that he had noted a rift among Morales's followers, "between the hard-liners who opposed any negotiations and those who were open to dialogue." He had been in constant negotiation with the pro-dialogue faction, which had quickly agreed to help stop the violence; later, a majority of MAS legislators voted to ratify Morales's resignation. Justiniano gloated, "They're negotiating because they could see there was no chance of success in persisting with the violent confrontation, and that is also a tacit acknowledgment of the legitimacy of this government."

Before working for Áñez, Justiniano was a prominent lawyer from the opposition stronghold of Santa Cruz. (Controversially, he led the defense for two members of the Wolfpack, a group of five young men who were accused of a gang rape.) I asked him about the accusations that, even if Morales had committed electoral fraud, the new administration had responded with what amounted to a military putsch. Justiniano laughed and said that the complaints reminded him of a passage from "Don Quixote"—apocryphal, it turns out—in which the knight-errant tells his sidekick, "Let the dogs bark, Sancho. It's a sign that we're advancing."

In La Paz, politicians seemed ready for a grudging compromise, but in the indigenous country of the altiplano the mood remained defiant. Evo's home village of Orinoca lies six hours by car from La Paz. Orinoca comprises only a few hundred people, but on its outskirts looms a massive concrete-and-glass building of sharply angled geometry: the Museum of the Cultural and Democratic Revolution, which Morales built, at a cost of seven million dollars, to present the country's history from the indigenous point of view. On a dirt lane outside the museum, I met an ancient woman, who was tending a herd of llamas. She wore an Evo campaign T-shirt that read "The people say yes." She had lived her whole life in Orinoca, she said, but she had been to La Paz a few times, to show support for Morales in rallies and demonstrations. When I asked how she felt about the political change that Áñez had brought to the country, she replied with a baseless but widespread insult: "That whore. I hear she used to sell her body for money." She hoped Evo would be back in power soon. He had been good for the people of the altiplano.

Morales's opponents accused him, not unfairly, of favoring the altiplano, but his efforts also helped redress a historic injustice. After the brutal Spanish conquest, indigenous Bolivians were subjected to a feudal labor system that remained in place until the nineteen-fifties, and were effectively denied the vote. Even after laws changed, racial attitudes remained deeply entrenched, and indigenous citizens lived mostly in poverty, without access to land titles, bank loans, university education, or government jobs.

Morales made such reforms his priority. But, as indigenous Bolivians prospered, the white population felt excluded. Albarracín suggested that Morales had overseen a clash of basic ideals: "Western values versus the indigenous cosmovision."

El Alto is effectively the capital of indigenous Bolivia. A bare-bones sprawl on the brown plain that begins at the La Paz crater's edge and extends to the horizon, the city is predominantly Aymara, and largely populated by migrants from poor rural areas. It reflects Bolivia's indigenous highland culture, with many of the women dressed in bowler hats and the bright-colored, bunched-out skirts called *polleras;* there are open-air food markets, hard-drinking bars, and a rough red-light district.

Thirty-five years ago, El Alto was little more than a huddle of adobe dwellings and market stalls. After the boom of the Evo years, it has a million inhabitants, and an exuberant local architecture, with façades covered in colorful glass and rooflines that jut out at eccentric angles. One new apartment building that I walked past had a towering replica of the Statue of Liberty incorporated into its upper floors.

Alexis Argüello, a thirty-three-year-old bookseller, told me that for most of his life he was ashamed to tell people that he was from El Alto. Gradually, the shame had been replaced by something like pride. A few years ago, he launched a small publishing imprint to showcase local writers. "For all of Evo's despotism and his government's faults, he helped create a new middle class from among people with more copper-colored skin," Argüello said. He had all but forgotten the indignities of life before, "such as the need to explain myself to police." Under the new administration, though, policemen had again begun antagonizing young men from El Alto.

For Áñez, antagonizing the indigenous is a significant risk. Although increasing numbers of Bolivians identify as mestizo, the population remains heavily indigenous, and the community's partisans are not easily intimidated. On El Alto's streets, effigies dangle from nooses attached to street lights, with placards that warn potential criminals of "popular justice." One sign said "Rats Who Are Caught Will Be Hanged and Burned."

Bolivia has a long history of organized protest, notably by miners and by the *cocaleros* whom Morales once represented, who assert their influence with marches, blockades, and street battles with police. Demonstrating miners often throw dynamite sticks, and deaths and injuries are not uncommon. In 2016, Morales's vice-minister of the interior went to a roadblock to negotiate with striking miners; they kidnapped him and tortured him to death.

In recent months, some of these same uncompromising partisans have come to Morales's defense. When he accused Áñez of fomenting a coup, hundreds of Aymara militants wearing red ponchos swarmed down the mountainside into La Paz, chanting, "Civil war now!" After the massacre at the Senkata gas facility, pro-Evo mobs destroyed seven of El Alto's eight police stations.

The city's policemen regrouped in the surviving station, in a middle-class neighborhood on the southern edge of town, where a sign over the gate read "Against Evil, for the Good of All." During my visit, hundreds of policemen from the burned-out districts were there, readying for patrols or taking shifts sleeping on the floor of an auditorium. A new police commander, Colonel Juan Carlos Alarcón, had been brought from the mining town of Oruro to impose order on the convulsed city. "It is with some pain that I take over here," he told me. "The job now is to reconcile this fracture that has opened up between the society and the police." I asked him about the neighborhood around Senkata,

which by all accounts still seethed with anger toward the police force. Alarcón said he was organizing a potluck lunch, and he hoped that Senkata people would attend. He was also intending to hold a Catholic Mass, he said, "for those of us who believe in God."

The town seemed unreceptive. One morning, a fund-raiser was held on El Alto's scrappy outskirts for the families of the victims of the massacre. In a small plaza, just past the Senkata facility, a stage had been set up, with a backdrop that read "The coup is against the people." An Andean band played *charango* and flute, and a group of university students from La Paz danced. The smell of burning palo santo filled the air, and venders sold "solidarity food"—empanadas and hot dogs—with the proceeds going to the victims' families. A bulletin board next to the stage showed photographs of the dead, and placards read "This democracy censors, persecutes, and kills."

A pale, bearded man stood onstage and explained that "oil companies backed by Yankee imperialism" had been behind the events in Senkata. He spoke about unrest in Mexico, strife in Palestine, and the protesters in Hong Kong, concluding, "It's all the same struggle." He was followed by a rapper, who delivered furiously charged lyrics that described the Palestinians and the people of El Alto as allies in the "battles of the world." In the end, he said, "the true resistance is right here."

When I saw Morales in Mexico, he told me that he had been up since three-thirty that morning, working the phones, strategizing with his supporters. From exile, he carefully monitored the developments back home, and adjusted his message as necessary to keep himself relevant. When MAS agreed to start negotiating with the Áñez government, he shook off the slight and announced that he would no longer seek to be President. After his deputies voted to accept his resignation, Morales took on a new role, as the Party's campaign manager. If he could no longer be king, he would be the kingmaker.

In mid-December, Morales called in to a gathering in Cochabamba, where several thousand MAS loyalists had assembled to discuss the Party's future. Cochabamba, Bolivia's third-largest city, sits in a fertile Andean valley southeast of La Paz—the gateway to the Chapare, the coca-growing region that is Morales's political base.

The assembly was held at a stadium called La Coronilla. On the sidewalk, people hawked DVDs: "Learn the truth about the coup financed by the United States!" Inside, several thousand people filled the bleachers, waving *wiphala* flags and buying snacks from strolling venders. A folk musician sang anti-imperialist lyrics to warm up the crowd. Miners wearing orange plastic helmets strode around purposefully.

As horns called the crowd to attention, an announcer welcomed MAS delegations from around the country, to cheers in Spanish, Aymara, and Quechua. The national anthem played, and people stood, one hand over their heart and the other clenched in a fist. After a moment's silence for fallen comrades, the leader of the Cochabamba MAS contingent spoke, ending with a shout of "Down with traitors!," which the crowd echoed rowdily. When the announcer declared that Morales "will return soon," there were chants of "Evo, Evo, Evo!" and "Evo, you are not alone!"

I was sitting with a woman who had worked in Morales's administration. She had quit out of frustration with the privileged circle around Evo—the *llunkus*, as she called them, "who surrounded and isolated him from the people." There was a rumor that Morales might leave

Mexico for Argentina, and, if he did, she said, "I hope he goes alone so he can be by himself for a while, and think. He needs to."

Still, the former aide joined in as the crowd chanted pro-Evo slogans. "The idea behind this assembly is unity, to leave divisions behind," she said. The crowd was unruly, and the atmosphere was tense; it was the first time since Morales's resignation that MAS had gathered in large numbers, and police helicopters buzzed in the air outside. She showed me Twitter messages sent by right-wingers; one urged the government to take advantage of the assembly to "capture the MAS criminals." In the bleachers, people took up defiant chants: "Long live our *wiphala*, long live our coca leaf!" Someone handed out a bitter message printed on a flyer:

> Áñez, little dyed woman,
> Self-proclaimed dictator,
> you authorized the killing of
> Bolivians, you murderer!
> Sellout to Yankee imperialism,
> Accursed traitor,
> The BOLIVIANS say
> you will not pass,
> Nor will God pardon your hypocrisy.

A speaker announced that "President Evo" was going to speak, and a hush fell. A moment later, Morales's voice filled the stadium. He saluted his "*compañeros y compañeras*," denounced the "fascist, racist coup," and promised that he would "soon be back in Bolivia." The crowd clapped and cheered. Evo stressed the need for unity and for the assembly to agree on candidates for the upcoming elections, which he was sure the Party would win.

After Morales signed off, another delegate came onstage to denounce the "cowards and sellouts" who had abandoned their positions during the crisis, taking refuge in embassies or fleeing the country. The former aide explained the vindictive tone: "Many of those who went into the embassies are seen as cowards because they were not actually being persecuted."

From the crowd, I spotted one of the officials who had resigned: Adriana Salvatierra, the former Senate leader, whose departure had allowed Áñez to take power. Salvatierra, thirty years old, with long hair, wore jeans and a black T-shirt that depicted a rising sun. I asked her if it had been a mistake for Evo and the MAS leadership to resign, given everything that had happened since. "We made some tactical and also strategic mistakes," she allowed. What about herself? She could be Bolivia's President right now. Did she have any regrets? Salvatierra shook her head. Even if she had tried to assume the Presidency, Morales's opponents would not have let her. "A coup was under way, and had been planned long beforehand," she insisted. "History

is a constant dialectic, not permanent, and there are advances and also reverses."

Morales's speech had reinforced his bid to remain the de-facto leader of Bolivia. But, from exile, he seemed far more able to divide the country than to lead it. I asked Salvatierra what she thought about his promise to come back, despite the government's threat to arrest him. She said, "The President's leadership will not be diminished if he is imprisoned." She reminded me that Morales had always presented himself as a revolutionary, and added, "If he is arrested, we'll mobilize."

Two blocks downhill from the Great House of the People, an unusual sculpture stands in the median of a busy street: a memorial to wartime defeat. It features a bronze tableau of a shirtless soldier, dying with his gun in his hand. A message spray-painted on the marble base dedicates the monument "to those fallen for democracy." Next to it, an embankment planted in multicolored flowers spells out "Honor and glory."

One evening in La Paz, the former senior MAS official suggested that his country's impasse was rooted in its history of defeat. Except for a few internal uprisings—a U.S.-assisted campaign that crushed Che Guevara's guerrillas, in 1967, and a couple of indigenous revolts quelled by massacres, in the nineteenth century—Bolivia had lost every war it engaged in. In the War of the Pacific, in the eighteen-seventies, it lost its coastline to its neighbor Chile. In the Chaco War, in the nineteen-thirties, it surrendered another huge swath of territory to Paraguay. "Our defeats are what made us different," the official said. "It doesn't matter to us if we lose. The thing we take pride from is our bravery in fighting back, in resisting."

In recent weeks, it has become clear that neither side intends to give up the fight. Morales, who has moved to Argentina, has called for the founding of civilian militias in Bolivia. (After a media uproar, he retracted the statement, saying that he had always "defended life and peace.") Áñez expelled the Spanish and Mexican Ambassadors, whom she suspected of conspiring to sneak Morales loyalists out of the country. Mauricio Claver-Carone, a Cuban-American who is the National Security Council's senior director for Western Hemisphere affairs, showed up in La Paz to discuss new aid agreements with Áñez, while chiding Argentina's government for allowing Morales to "foment violence." In Washington, Erick Foronda and Arturo Murillo posed for photographs with Marco Rubio.

Elections are scheduled for May, and Morales announced his favored candidate: his former economy minister, Luis Arce. Áñez, who had invited USAID back, to give "technical aid" with the elections, announced that she, too, would run for President. There was backlash from the political class: her minister of communications quit, saying that Áñez was following Evo's playbook, and the former candidate Carlos Mesa protested. But the military, under a new commander appointed by Áñez, expressed no concern as her "interim government" tried to make itself permanent.

Morales's alleged electoral fraud, and his party's acceptance of new elections without him, makes it difficult to call his ouster a coup. Añez's behavior makes it hard not to. In addition to the violence committed by security forces, her government announced early this year that it would investigate nearly six hundred former members of Morales's administration. According to the United Nations, at least a hundred and sixty people, including senior officials, have been prosecuted or detained, on accusations that range from corruption and terrorism to "making illegal appointments." In January, Áñez, urging unity in the elections, warned the country not to allow "the savages to return to power."

Marcela Araúz, the former MAS communications director, complained of the "blindness of Bolivia's middle class," who supported the new status quo "but who don't seem to get that Evo's fraud doesn't mean there wasn't a coup." There was real persecution happening in Bolivia, she said, and she was outraged at the media silence about it. Like others I spoke to, Araúz felt certain that a right-wing regime would do whatever was necessary to triumph in the elections: "Now that they have the control, they are not going to let it go." ♦

PHOTOGRAPH BY THOMAS ALBDORF

I was putting myself out there. On my return to San Francisco from a bleak Thanksgiving with my surviving relatives in Illinois, I downloaded Tinder, Bumble, and a few other apps I'd seen Instagram ads for. I resolved to pass judgment on several hundred men per day, and to make an effort to message the few I matched with.

I'd never liked the idea of finding a romantic partner on an app, the way you'd order pizza or an Uber. To further complicate matters, it was estimated that fifty per cent of men on dating apps in the city were now blots. But what choice did I have? Apps seemed to be the way everyone found each other these days. After my last breakup, I spent a while "letting something happen," which meant doing nothing. Years passed and nothing did happen, and I realized that without my intervention, my hand pushing the warm back of fate, it was possible nothing ever would. In the end, it seemed to come down to never dating again or taking the chance of being blotted. Though I supposed there had always been risks.

The early blots had been easy to identify. They were too handsome, for one thing. Their skin was smooth and glowing, and they were uniformly tall and lean. Jawlines you could cut bread with. They looked like models, and they had no sense of humor.

I met one of them several years ago. My friend Peter had invited me to a dinner party hosted by a tech founder he'd grown up with in the Sunset, and with whom he'd once followed the band Phish around the country, selling nitrous poppers to concertgoers. Peter and I didn't really hang out, beyond the meetings we attended in church basements for people who no longer drank. But I was bored, and it was a free dinner, and Peter made it sound as if he'd already asked a bunch of people who'd said no, which took some of the pressure off.

At dinner, I sat next to a guy named Roger. He had the telltale blot look—high forehead, lush hair, shapely eyebrows—but I didn't recognize it for what it was, because the blot phenomenon hadn't yet broken through in the media. He was solicitous, asking about my family, my work as a teacher, and my resentment toward the tech industry.

Roger seemed eager to charm, but I was not charmed. I felt spotlighted by his attentiveness, his anticipation of what I might want—another helping of fava-bean salad, more water, an extra napkin after I dropped a chunk of braised pork on the lap of my skirt. I would say something self-deprecating, and he'd regard me steadily and assure me that I was a wonderful person, deserving of all I wanted from life, which wasn't what I'd been asking for. Roger didn't know me and was not a credible judge of my worth—unless his position was that everyone had worth, which made him no judge whatsoever. When I shifted the subject to him, he supplied a backstory that seemed pre-written.

"I came from ranchland in the northern United States," he told me. "My father was stern but loving, in his way. My mother is a wonderful woman who raised the four of us into strong, capable adults. My childhood was not without hardship, but these adversities shaped me into the person I am today. Now I live in the San Francisco Bay Area, land of innovation and possibility. I am grateful for the life I've been given, and I know it is thanks to the people who have loved and supported me on the journey."

I forced a chuckle of acknowledgment. "Wow," I said. "That's great."

As I drove Peter back to the Richmond in my decrepit Corolla, he revealed that his friend, the event's host, had sprinkled the dinner party with blots.

"Blots?"

"It's an acronym for something," Peter explained. "They're biomorphic humanoids. The latest advancement in the field of tactile illusion." He paused. "Fake people," he added.

I concealed my shock, not wanting to give Peter the satisfaction. "So you invited me to be the subject of a Turing test for some company's new product, without compensation," I said.

"You got a free dinner, didn't you?"

"Well, he was boring," I said. "And too handsome. I hate guys like that."

"Handsome guys?"

"Yeah. I'm not attracted to them."

Peter said he hoped I'd written all this on the comment card that had been distributed with the gelato, which asked me to rate my dinner companions' various attributes. I'd given Roger all fives, out of habit, and in retrospect I was glad not to have aided the blot revolution with my honest feedback.

The blots were designed to perform caretaking jobs that necessitated a high level of empathy. They were meant to work in hospice and elder-care centers, tending to people who were suffering and who would soon die. Such jobs were typically low-paying, and it would be better, more ethical, so the thinking went, to place blots in those roles. They would do a fine job, and then after a few months they'd dematerialize, their corporeal presence dissipating into a cloud of vapor.

But, aside from a few élite facilities, hospitals didn't invest in the blot program, as it was prohibitively expensive and unpopular among donors. The families who could afford topflight medical care didn't like the idea of their loved ones being cared for by blots, even when it was shown that blots performed this labor more effectively than humans. Soon blot technology was appropriated by a Russian company, and blots were employed in illegal activities—most commonly, identity fraud. Blots began using dating apps to target vulnerable women. It had happened to my friend Alicia last summer.

"Friend" is a term I use loosely. Alicia was someone I knew from the recovery community. A group of us sometimes went out for food after a meeting, and it was on such an occasion, six months ago, that Alicia told us about her experience with a blot named Steve. I already suspected Alicia had been blotted, because her Facebook profile had engaged me in eerie conversation a few weeks earlier. *I have always admired your shoes*, she messaged me, late one night, and I thought at first that she'd relapsed and was taking the opportunity to insult me.

Five of us were out at a diner on Geary, a place we liked even though the food was overpriced and bad. Alicia ordered a chocolate milkshake—like a child, I thought—and recounted the ordeal. Steve had proposed that they go on a weekend trip to Big Sur, after just a few weeks of dating. This was textbook blot, a red flag Alicia should have recognized. Blots always wanted to go to Big Sur, where cell service was spotty, to give themselves

some lead time with the victim's data. They'd lavish a woman with praise, heavy food, and good sex, and then in the middle of the night they'd steal the data stored in her phone, copy her credit-card info, and disappear with a voluptuous "bloop" sound, like a raindrop hitting the bottom of a metal bucket, a cloud of lavender-scented vapor all that remained.

"I woke up and he was gone," Alicia said. "The room smelled great, though."

It took months to untangle Steve's work. His tactics were vindictive, and strangely intimate. He'd sent personalized e-mails to everyone in her contacts, exploiting each scrap of information Alicia had divulged in the weeks they'd dated. On her Facebook page, he posted provocative selfies she'd sent to him or kept on her phone. We had all seen these photos—Alicia, in a lace bralette and thong, posing in a full-length mirror in the dingy shared bathroom of her apartment, her back arched at what looked like a painful angle to showcase her ass.

At the diner, Alicia framed herself as a woman with a hard-won ounce of wisdom. "If it seems too good to be true, it probably is," she said, then kept sucking air through her milkshake straw. I nodded along with the others, thinking that Alicia was an idiot. Steve had not even done a good job of concealing his blot identity, and she'd fallen for him anyway, clinging to the hope that her time had finally come.

Blot technology continued to advance. Blots were now said to be programmed with more complex psychological profiles, glaring flaws, and varied physical characteristics, which made detection increasingly difficult. Blots were always male, because their original creators believed that male blots would more easily convey authority, minimizing the risk of sexual exploitation by unscrupulous hospital employees. I didn't want to join Alicia among the ranks of the blotted, so I was vigilant as I chatted with men on the apps.

A few weeks into my new routine, I matched with Sam. His profile was brief and inoffensive, referencing his love of yoga, backpacking, and live music. He worked for a tech company, something about firewalls. I didn't know what those were, and he didn't care to explain. *It's just a job,* he wrote, then changed the subject to bands he wanted to see.

On our first date, we went to a Thai restaurant near my house. Sam was tall and reasonably attractive, but not in the polished, male-model way of the blot I'd met at the dinner party. His body was thick, his shoulders broad beneath his black denim jacket. His brown hair reached his shoulders, and his face was covered in a patchy beard that seemed incidental, as if he'd simply run out of razors one day and been too lazy to buy more.

Sam brooded over the menu. I proposed that we split curry and noodles, and he agreed, seeming relieved to have the burden of deciding removed. After we ordered, he provided a cursory sketch of his childhood in Wisconsin, at my prompting. His account was less eloquent than Roger's had been, and this helped assure me of its authenticity. Sam had done a master's degree in computer science at U.W.-Madison, then broken off an engagement to his longtime girlfriend. When I asked why they'd split, he said only that they'd begun dating too young and had grown apart over the years. He had moved to San Francisco eight months ago, seeking a new start.

I told Sam that I'd lived in the city for ten years, and waited for him to ask why I'd moved here. But then our food came, and the thread was lost. This had happened several times while we were messaging on the app—I would make some reference to my life, and Sam would fail to ask a logical follow-up question. I savored these instances of human selfishness. Even if the new generation of blots had more flaws than the old ones, I figured they'd still be primed to retrieve any bread crumb of a woman's past that might help them better understand her, in order to more thoroughly fuck her over when the time came. Sam's inattention was a kind of freedom. I could say anything, and he'd simply nod, and a moment later begin talking about something else.

I allowed Sam to set the pace of our dating, waiting for him to text me and propose when we should hang out next. On our third date, I invited him back to my apartment after dinner, and we had sex. Sam handled my body thoughtfully, like a new pair of shoes he would break in and wear often. It was not mind-blowing, but early sex rarely was. It wasn't horrifyingly bad, and in this I saw limitless potential. He was careful with his weight and with where he placed his knees.

As I lay in the dark with my arm slung across Sam's chest, I waited for the old void-opening feeling to take me, the particular loneliness of lying next to another person. But, for once, this sadness didn't arrive. It felt good having Sam there, as if the last puzzle piece had been set in place. For the first time in years, my apartment was full. The cats, who usually slept on the bed with me, had been displaced. I sensed their presence out in the dark, on the chair or the couch or in the closet. Sam had petted them for a while when he arrived. He'd allowed one cat to bite his hand gently, the other to drool on the thigh of his jeans. It was nice to have four mammals under one roof, each of us trusting the others not to kill us while we slept. This was the appeal, I thought, of a family. This was what everyone had been going on about all these years.

On Monday, I went to work as usual, though the plates of my life had shifted. I was dating someone now. My senses felt heightened as I biked down Market. I saw the world through the eyes of a recently fucked woman.

I was a teacher, of sorts. I'd had the same two part-time jobs for years, at a private E.S.L. school and at a for-profit art university that did heavy recruiting in China. In the mornings, I taught Upper-Intermediate English to a class of fourteen students at the E.S.L. school. The students were in their late teens and early twenties, mostly from Switzerland, South Korea, and Saudi Arabia. The roster changed from week to week. There was no sense of continuity or progression toward an end point. We worked through the proprietary textbook, then started again at the beginning.

In the afternoons, I'd head to one of the art classes for which I was providing what the college termed "language support." I took notes while the instructor lectured on fashion design

or computer animation or art history. After the lecture, I would wait for the international students to ask for my help—to explain difficult vocabulary and American colloquialisms, providing a verbal CliffsNotes of what we'd just heard—but they rarely did.

I moved through that Monday in a neurochemical fog. I'd been single long enough that my tendrils of attachment had dried up and ceased issuing commands. Now they'd been activated again, and I wondered how I had ever cared about anything other than sex. I resisted the urge to text Sam. My single years had made me strong, and I was determined not to sabotage this new relationship. I would wait for Sam to make contact, even if it took several days. I accepted the possibility that he'd never contact me again. Perhaps he would turn out to be a blot, or simply a man who didn't want a relationship. Such uncertainty was the nature of existence. We brought things into our lives, and time passed. Things exited our lives. That was about all that ever happened.

I didn't tell my friends about Sam right away. It was going well, which I knew they would take as an ominous sign. I had opened myself to the possibility of being blotted, and I didn't want to hear my misgivings echoed by others.

When Sam and I had been dating for a month, I was out at the diner after our Tuesday-night meeting with Peter, Kevin, and Dan. All three men were in their forties, and single. Dan told us about a neighbor he'd been sleeping with; she now expected to come over every night to watch TV, but Dan preferred to watch TV alone. Kevin asked if I'd been seeing anyone, and I mentioned Sam, careful to downplay how invested I'd already become.

"You met him on Tinder?" Kevin said, skeptically.

"Yeah, but I'm pretty sure he's not a blot," I said. "He's very casual about the whole thing."

"What does he look like?" Peter asked.

"I think he's attractive," I admitted. "But he's also kind of ugly. Not like a blot."

The men exchanged meaningful looks. "Does he have a car?" Peter said. Blots couldn't get driver's licenses; it was a sign the articles mentioned.

"Well, no," I said. "But he doesn't need one. He takes BART."

"Have you seen his place?" Dan asked.

Sam lived in the Oakland Hills. I'd slept at his apartment once, at my insistence. He warned me to be silent as we descended the carpeted stairs to his room. He'd lived there for only a month, and wasn't sure if having overnight guests was cool with his roommates. So I was asked to pretend I didn't exist, something I had plenty of practice with. It was a little degrading, which I took as another promising sign.

Sam slept in a sleeping bag wadded at the center of a king-size bed. There was a closet in the hallway where he stored camping gear, and from which he retrieved a spare pillow for me, still in its wrapping, as if he'd bought it for this purpose. At the foot of the bed was a Rubbermaid container in which he kept folded T-shirts and socks. On its lid sat an electric kettle he used to boil water for coffee, so that he wouldn't have to go upstairs. He did this on the morning I woke up there. We passed a single mug back and forth. I asked if he had any milk.

"I think there's some in the kitchen," he said. I waited for him to get the milk, but he continued sitting on the edge of the bed, drinking the coffee. I would have got it myself, but I wasn't supposed to betray my presence to his roommates.

I highlighted this detail as evidence of Sam's humanity. "If he were a blot, he wouldn't act that way," I said. "He would jump at the opportunity to get milk for my coffee. They wouldn't program them to be completely selfish." I paused. "Would they?"

Peter shook his head doubtfully. "I don't know, man," he said. "The technology keeps getting more advanced. You need to be careful."

"Maybe he isn't a blot," Dan said, standing and tossing a twenty onto the plastic tray that held our check. "He might just be kind of a dick."

The early blots didn't live anywhere. They stalked the streets and the park all night, waiting for their next date. There were still some of them out there, blots who'd never managed to attach to a host. The company that unleashed them had apparently forgot, or didn't care, leaving them to wander eternally,

"Your vacation request is denied, Wolverine. I'm sorry, but we just can't lose you right now."

like those scooters you saw abandoned on sidewalks. Sometimes I passed one on the street, his eyes frantic, his clothes rumpled, his skin and hair still perfect.

Once I'd seen Sam's place, I was satisfied. We never stayed there again, as my apartment was objectively superior. I would clean it the day he was coming over, and I always made sure I had eggs and coffee for the morning. Before we went to bed, Sam would put his Japanese selvedge jeans and horsehide boots on a high shelf in my closet, so the cats wouldn't scratch them. I had never known my cats to scratch shoes or clothes, but I didn't want to insist on their harmlessness, in case I was wrong.

I allowed Sam to take his protective measures, and, in turn, I took mine. I slept with my laptop placed on the shelf built into the wall on my side of the bed, my phone tucked under my pillow. I locked my devices with pass codes, though it had been documented that blots were able to hack these codes. If Sam was a blot, and he tried to reach over me for my laptop, I was sure to wake up. I was a light sleeper, naturally anxious, especially with a new man next to me. Not that we slept much when Sam stayed over. We usually had sex two or three times, then again in the morning. Each round yielded diminishing returns. Sometimes, toward the end, Sam couldn't come at all, and I would feel satisfied, as if I had drained a reservoir.

Months passed, and Sam and I fell into a routine approximating a relationship. I continued letting him take the lead, reminding myself that anything I held too tightly would slip through my fingers like sand. I lived for the one weekend night we'd go out for dinner, then head back to my apartment and have sex.

On a Wednesday, I was bored enough during a three-hour fashion-design class that I dared to text Sam first. I was relieved that he hadn't proposed a trip to Big Sur, but I'd been thinking it might be nice to go somewhere else. I had a long weekend coming up in a few weeks.

I sent the text—*Prez Day soon! Any interest in a weekend getaway*?—and returned to my notebook. I took meticulous notes during the instructor's lecture, but everything after that, while the students worked individually on their design projects, was gibberish I'd scrawled in an attempt to look occupied.

Sounds good, Sam had written, when I next checked my phone.

Great! I replied. *Where should we go*?

I regretted this text immediately. Sam might feel pressured by my eagerness and withdraw. Sure enough, he didn't write back for three hours. *Let's play it by ear*, he finally replied. *Still plenty of time*.

On the Sunday before Presidents' Day weekend, Sam sat on my love seat, eating the eggs I had made, while I sat at my desk by the window. He'd retrieved his clothes from my closet and put them back on, a black T-shirt with a shallow V-neck and his selvedge jeans. I knew that in another twenty minutes he'd be gone. I didn't see how we could delay making a plan any longer.

"So," I said carefully. "Where should we go next weekend?"

"Oh, right," Sam said, as if he hadn't been thinking about it at all. "Let's check the weather."

I got my laptop and joined him on the love seat. A weather site projected a solid wall of rain for the entire coastal region, starting on Tuesday and continuing through the following week. This would make camping difficult, unless we drove to the desert, which I doubted my twenty-year-old car would

TO BE A DAUGHTER AND TO HAVE A DAUGHTER

can forecast at-odds relationships
especially when the mother hazards to write
while keeping the baby safe
from herself as she and the baby wail,
one in the crib, the other on the floor, to wail
with the vacuum cleaner so the daughter
can't hear mama-drowning, so the new relationship
isn't all arithmetic and geometry, all right
angles barely connecting. What is left
at dusk, still tender and safe,
you couldn't pluck and lock in a safe—
not unlike a girl calf and her mama whale,
two generations of breaching daughters
applauded by tourists on a ship
but more likely, if they are right
whales, or what species are left
of those docile equatorial pods, never left
by men hunting their fat. They are not safe.
Larger than grays, smaller than blue whales,
mother and son or daughter
in their yearlong relationship
are so buoyant that whalers called them "the right
whale to hunt." Funny, given the mariner's rite
to trick a man to think he'd been left
for the sharks without the safety
of pity or prayer—then that whaler would wail
for his own mother, wife, or daughter.
When it comes to daughter-mother relationships—

I've written on both till there's nothing left
without breaching safety, without whaling.
After all, I love daughters and I love ships.

—*Kimiko Hahn*

be up for. It was the first time I had opened my laptop in Sam's presence. I kept waiting for him to grab it, but he maintained a respectful distance, suggesting terms I might search for.

We considered alternatives to camping, and landed on some hot springs up north. I'd heard about this no-frills resort from friends, a place where swimsuits were optional and guests cooked their meals in a communal kitchen. Sam made the call, using his credit card for the three-night reservation, with the expectation that I would Venmo him my half. I listened as he slowly repeated his name to the person on the other end of the line. It was the first time I'd heard him speak his own last name aloud, and I was surprised by the way he pronounced it, the hard "a" that I'd assumed was soft.

After he hung up, Sam slung his arm around my shoulders and asked what my plans for the day were. Normally, he left right after the eggs. I felt a clawing need to make him stay longer. "We could make juice," I proposed.

I remembered that on Sundays there was a small farmers' market on Clement Street. The morning fog had burned off, and we walked to the market beneath a cold blue sky. We bought kale, green apples, celery, beets, and ginger, splitting the cost evenly. I watched Sam make small talk with the venders. He spent several minutes asking a teen-age boy about the different types of apple his family's orchard cultivated, and I felt proud, imagining that the boy was impressed by Sam's masculine competence. Back in my kitchen, we washed the produce, cut it into pieces, and took turns feeding the pieces into the hopper of my juicer and plunging down with the special stick.

We moved back into the main room with our glasses of tart, grainy juice. I felt a new ease unfurling between us, as if making juice had sealed us within a bubble of domesticity. I asked Sam to teach me how to pitch an imaginary baseball, knowing this request would gratify him. He often referenced his years as a left-handed pitcher in high school. He'd almost been recruited to a Division I school, whatever that meant, but was thwarted by a vindictive coach who refused to let him play the day the recruiters visited, for reasons I didn't quite understand.

We stood in the middle of my apartment, and Sam showed me how to turn my upper body, channelling my full energy into my pitching arm. I watched us in the mirrored wall that slid to expose my closet. As I drew my arm back for another fake pitch, I remembered my dad teaching me how to throw a ball, in our small back yard in the suburbs of Chicago; he'd taken pride in my not throwing "like a girl," though that was all I was.

I mentioned this to Sam, and, before I could stop myself, I'd begun talking about my dad's descent into drug addiction, well under way on the day he taught me to throw. We settled into the love seat, and I recounted the full story of my dad's diminishment. He'd disappear for weeks, then return in worse shape than before. He went to rehab at one point, and when he came back he'd grown a beard. I told Sam about the uncanny feeling of seeing my dad with a beard, as if he had been replaced by a similar man, the details slightly off, like when a TV show switched actors between seasons. I was fourteen then; it was the last time I saw him. For five years afterward, he sent me and my mom the occasional letter, full of apologies, along with promises that he was cleaning up his

act and would be back with us soon. Eventually, the letters stopped coming, and my mom thought it was best we move on.

There was little emotion in my telling; I'd told the story in therapy, and in meetings, and in the early stages of past relationships, at the juncture where I hoped they might become more serious. The feeling was sucked out, the bare facts remaining, like the fibre disgorged by the juicer.

Sam listened attentively. When I finished, he placed his empty juice glass on the coffee table, cupped my face in his broad hand, and kissed me. It was a nice gesture, but it felt a bit affected, as if it had been lifted from a movie—some scene where a character reveals scars on her body, and the man gravely kisses each of them, confirming that he still accepts and desires her.

But, for once, when Sam left my apartment I didn't feel desolate in his absence. I felt we had forged a new intimacy, like a hot stone tucked at the base of my throat, keeping me warm.

The night before our trip, Sam slept over, and in the morning we drove north in my Corolla. It was raining as we crossed the Golden Gate Bridge, the view obscured by thick fog, as if the landscape resisted collaboration in the romantic narrative I'd spun around the weekend. We stopped at a Trader Joe's in San Rafael, and ticked through items on the list we had made. As we waited in line with our cart, I imagined doing this with Sam, year after year. We would buy a house in some region where buying a house was possible. We would work in separate rooms, and bring each other juice. In a surprising twist of fate, I would have what other people had.

The resort was east of Mendocino, accessed via narrow roads carved through dense forest. Sam had offered to drive on this last leg, and I sat tensely in the passenger seat, my old car feeling like a plastic toy that might splinter apart.

We checked in at the lodge and found our room, one of the tiny, free-standing cottages lining the gravel path to the pools. The door didn't lock. We were advised not to keep anything of value in our room, and I was happy to leave my phone in the trunk of my car. I'd planned to wear my swimsuit, but it was clear when we entered the locker room that this would make a person stand out, in a bad way. Everyone used the pools naked. We saw them through the locker-room window, mostly couples and a few solo middle-aged men, strolling across the wet concrete. Judgment glimmered through me—something about hippies, people who moved through the world with unwarranted confidence—a prejudice I hadn't known

I harbored. I felt shy as I removed my clothes and stacked them in a locker; being naked with Sam in this context felt different from being naked with him in my apartment.

We sat on a ledge in the first pool, a cold drizzle falling on our shoulders. After a few minutes, nudity no longer seemed like a big deal. Without swimsuits, the human body was a neutral thing, detached from eroticism, though I still wrapped my towel around myself as we moved from one pool to another. We explored the resort's attractions: the large, lukewarm pool, several hotter pools, a small cold pool walled in colorful tile, a sauna and a steam room separated by a cedar deck. When we'd completed a full circuit and were back in the first pool, I glanced at the clock above the locker-room entrance and saw that only an hour had passed. My chest tightened, and I wondered if perhaps we had come for too long.

As we sat in the lukewarm pool, I allowed my gaze to alight momentarily on other people. Across from us was an older man with long, stringy gray hair pulled into a ponytail, his eyes closed, his thin lips serenely compressed. A couple emerged from the sauna. They seemed oddly matched—the woman was average-looking, in her late thirties, with a soft body and a pinched, unremarkable face, while the man was tall and muscular, with the striking good looks of a young actor.

I nudged Sam. "Do you think he's a blot?" I whispered, nodding toward the couple.

"A what?"

I didn't know how anyone could have missed hearing about blots, as there had been extensive news coverage of the latest advancements in pirated blot technology. I explained the phenomenon, and Sam nodded, his face set in mild bemusement. I felt agitated by his disinterest. I wanted to provoke more of a reaction.

"When we first started dating, I was worried you might be one," I said.

"Oh yeah?" Sam said.

"I was on the lookout for clues," I said.

Sam shrugged. "Well, sorry to disappoint you," he said, giving my left thigh a playful squeeze under the water.

The conversation lapsed again. I was annoyed that Sam wouldn't join me in speculation about the mismatched couple, who had retreated into the locker room. On the drive up, we'd had music as a buffer, allowing us to pass long stretches without speaking. As we settled in for a last pre-dinner soak in the hottest pool, I waited to see what he would talk about in the absence of external cues. He began complaining that the resort forbade cooking meat on the property; he was worried about getting enough protein to maintain the muscle mass he'd painstakingly built at the gym. I asked him what he ate during the week, when we were apart, and he said mostly skinless chicken with mixed greens, and vanilla-flavored Muscle Milk.

"Wow," I said. "You're a protein fiend."

Sam gave me a cross look. "I wouldn't say that," he said.

"No?"

"You make it sound stupid."

"That wasn't how I meant it," I said, though I realized it was. I was nervous, eager to lighten the mood. I began telling a story about an ex, a younger guy who played bass in a Tool cover band called Stool. I'd met him at a meeting. Before he got sober, he'd spent a year eating only sardines in mustard sauce, which he bought tins of at Safeway on his liquor runs. In his first six months sober, he'd eaten only ice cream, a gallon a day.

"When we dated, though, he was back to a pretty regular diet," I said. "Well, regular enough. He still ate a lot of ice cream."

Sam's mouth was a pink dash set within a tumult of beard growth. "Gross," he said.

"Sure," I said. "He thought so, too."

"That's a great question! In fact, it's a wonderful, probing, sensitive question that's making me reassess all my life's work."

"I'd rather not hear about other guys you've dated," Sam said.

This caught me off guard. "Why not?"

"Especially if they're weird dudes who eat only sardines."

"That was just one thing about him," I said. "He had a lot of good qualities, too."

"I don't think it's wise to talk about previous partners," Sam said. "You've done that before, and it was a turnoff then, too."

I watched myself descend into a familiar, sulky silence. Sam tried to cajole me on our walk to the showers. I sensed his desperation when he pointed out a set of ceramic goose planters near the lukewarm pool. "Cute," I agreed, absently.

We rinsed the minerals from our skin and dressed in the locker room. As we walked down the gravel drive toward the main lodge, the kitchen in which we'd stashed our meatless groceries, Sam took my hand.

"Are you O.K.?" he said.

"I'm fine," I said stiffly.

"Hey," Sam said. He stopped and turned to face me. "I'm sorry, O.K.?"

"It's fine," I said, meeting his gaze. "I won't talk about my exes again."

"No, don't say that. I want you to talk about whatever you want."

He was smiling, hopefully. I could see that he really was sorry, though I suspected he didn't know why he should be.

We went inside and made wraps with vegetables and tempeh, stir-fried in a cast-iron skillet. We ate in a section of the lodge that resembled a train car, with tables pushed against windows that overlooked a lush, forested ravine. Though Sam had apologized, I still felt distant from him, as if something had been left unresolved.

"I'd like you to talk about whatever you want, too," I said.

Sam's jaw clenched in response. He must have thought he'd escaped this topic. "O.K.," he said. "Pretty sure that's what I've been doing."

"I mean, I'd like to hear more about your past," I said. "Your exes, for instance."

Sam laughed. "Why does this feel like therapy all of a sudden?"

"Have you ever done therapy?" I said, perking up at the reference.

Sam's face reddened. "A few times, with my ex. Couples counselling."

"Was it helpful?"

"I dunno," Sam said, unfolding his wrap and picking out chunks of tempeh. "I'm not good at talking about feelings. It's just the way I was raised, I guess."

I reminded myself of the importance of accepting a partner exactly as he was in this moment, as I'd advised my friends to do when they came to me with complaints about their relationships. But our first minor conflict had broken a dam of judgment within me. As the second day proceeded, I picked up on additional things Sam did that annoyed me. At one point, we had the sauna to ourselves, and I'd begun telling a story about a friend from college who was having problems in her marriage when Sam emitted a false, barking laugh.

"What's so funny?" I said, startled.

"Nothing," he said. "It's a thing my brother and I do sometimes."

"Are you not interested in what I have to say?"

The mismatched couple entered the sauna. The woman draped a towel on the bench below us and lay across it, tits up, while the blot-looking man sat in one of the Adirondack chairs, legs spread wide. He briefly met my gaze, his full lips curling into a smile.

"It's not like that," Sam said quietly, patting my thigh. "It's just a joke."

Later, as we sat in one of the warmer pools, I told Sam about my work at the art school, the long hours of idleness, my feelings of shame and worthlessness as I continued collecting a paycheck for simply existing in a room.

"So you're getting paid to do nothing?" he said. "Sounds pretty great."

I found that I couldn't properly convey the absurdity of my role. I probably just sounded spoiled. I switched tack, telling him about the meetings I went to, the recovery program I worked. Sam had been supportive, early on, of my sobriety, saying it was good that "you figured your shit out." But, as I talked about the beauty of how meetings brought together all types of people, I realized I must sound brainwashed, as if I belonged to a New Age cult.

I turned and saw that his eyes were closed, his head tilted back against the edge of the pool. He appeared to be meditating, or maybe he'd fallen asleep.

By the third night, I longed to be back in my apartment, with the cats. At dinner, I nodded through Sam's commentary on the lodge's décor, having given up on planting seeds for a conversation of genuine depth. We had eaten most of the food we'd brought, and were down to wheat tortillas and trail mix. On the other side of the dining room, the average woman and her hot boyfriend sat drinking red wine and eating an elaborate vegetable stir-fry. I was annoyed that the man had continued existing. I'd been certain that he was a blot, and that one night he'd dissipate into vapor. I imagined we'd see her alone in the pools, making the most of her remaining vacation before heading back to a life rendered chaotic by the blot's aggressions. But here they were, wearing plush robes and speaking animatedly in hushed voices. At one point, the woman laughed at something the man had said, then glanced at us guiltily, as if embarrassed to have disrupted the serenity of the lodge.

When we returned to our room, I initiated sex, hoping to work some angle of Sam into myself in a way that would yield pleasure. We moved our bodies quietly, not wanting to disturb the other guests. When it was over we lay in the dark, my head resting on Sam's chest. I had not worn makeup since the day we arrived. My hair was tangled, still damp, smelling of the tea-tree shampoo provided in the communal shower. I had been naked and wet for most of the past three days. I hadn't looked at a screen since we got here, our phones powered down and locked in my trunk. I'd had every opportunity to be fully present with Sam, but the absence of distraction had revealed only our disconnection. I felt as though my true self were locked in a vault back in the city. I imagined that Sam possessed a similar vault, but I was still unable to picture what it might contain.

"It's so nice here," I whispered. Sam didn't know it, but this was my final attempt. I was giving him one last chance to reveal some soft part of himself he'd kept hidden.

But he only murmured, "Mm-hmm." Minutes passed, and I felt his muscles

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be found
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tense and then slacken beneath my arm. The old loneliness washed through me. I thought back to the dinner party where I'd met Roger, the blot. How he had asked me questions with real interest. How he had noticed when my glass was empty, and taken it upon himself to refill it.

In the morning, we drove back to the city. I told Sam I'd drop him off near the Civic Center BART station. I pulled over on McAllister and put my flashers on. Sam unbuckled his seat belt, placed his hand on my knee, and gazed into my eyes. Once again, I felt that he was imitating something from a movie. His gestures of affection now seemed parodic, like the false laugh he'd interrupted me with, a joke he shared with his brother, in absentia, at my expense. "Great weekend," he said, and I nodded.

"It really was," I said. Sam cupped the side of my face in his hand—his signature move, I thought bitterly—and planted a long kiss on my mouth. I was relieved when he finally got out of the car. I watched him stand at the corner of McAllister and Polk, waiting for the light to change. From this distance, he could have been anyone, his existence a neutral fact, untethered from mine. It occurred to me that Sam might be a blot after all, a new kind that aimed at a longer-term deception by keeping his host at arm's length. It occurred to me that it didn't really matter either way.

Back home, the cats journeyed to the door to greet me, less swiftly than they had in their youth. I opened a can of wet food, sliced the pâté down the middle with the tip of a butter knife, and distributed half on each of two hexagonal black plates set on the floor. I'd had a neighbor come by and feed them while I was away, but he hadn't scooped out the litter boxes, and I cleared them now of the clumps that had gathered. I saw my apartment with fresh eyes, in the harsh light of a day I had not begun here. It was quiet, and in the stillness I could hear time moving forward.

I had spent three months with Sam—not long, but enough that the prospect of starting over seemed exhausting. I imagined breaking up with him, razing what we had just started to build. I would do the same things with a different man, all the milestones, yet again, with someone new. I would peel myself open and unpack my past for his perusal. We would make juice together. I would clean each piece of the juicer carefully, dry it with a dish towel, replace it in the drawer. There would be a period of mutual excitement at the beginning, and then he would tire of me, or I of him. It would last however long it lasted, and then it would end.

From my bag, my phone dinged. Sam had already texted, which surprised me. *Great weekend,* he'd written, in lazy repetition of the sentiment he'd expressed in the car. He punctuated his message with a heart emoji, the first such icon he'd ever sent. I knew he considered this significant and assumed I would, too, akin to a profession of love.

I lowered myself onto the love seat. I didn't reply to Sam's text immediately, but I already had an idea of what I would write, and that I might come to regret it.

A week ago, I was walking through Golden Gate Park on my way to the Haight, to have dinner with my friend from college, who was now going through a divorce. I passed a clearing where five identical men sat at a picnic table. It was a strange sight, one that made me pause. On further inspection, they were not identical; their features were slightly different, though they all possessed the same height and build, and held themselves with the same prim, upright posture. They spoke calmly while playing a card game. I was struck by how comfortable they seemed with one another, as if they'd been acquainted long enough that they did not have to say much in order to be understood.

Then one of them spotted me. His golden-brown eyes lit up, his energies activated and channelled in my direction. "Hey!" he said, extricating himself from the picnic table and jogging toward me. "You look like a fascinating, intelligent woman, a person with much to offer. Do you want to go on a date? Have you ever witnessed the beauty of Big Sur in the summertime?"

The others turned, eyes flaring, long, perfect hands laying cards on the table.

I moved toward the space they had cleared for me. ♦

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BOOKS

THE BLIGHT

How our economy has created an epidemic of despair.

BY ATUL GAWANDE

It all started with a bad back. For more than a decade, the Princeton economist Anne Case had suffered from chronic lower-back pain, and nothing seemed to help. She'd made her name studying the connections between health and economic patterns in people's lives; her research showed, for instance, a connection between your health in early childhood, or even in utero, and your economic status later in life. So she decided to research the patterns of pain in the population. And as she pulled on this thread she found a bigger, more alarming story than she ever expected.

The question she began with, in 2014, was whether pain had grown more or less prevalent in the United States over the past few decades. Given advances in labor-saving technologies and in pain treatments, she expected that the prevalence reported in population surveys would have fallen. Instead, it had gone up. Some hundred million Americans now suffer from chronic pain—that is, they've been in pain on most days for

Death rates among less educated, working-class whites have caused life expectancy in the U.S. as a whole to fall.

ILLUSTRATION BY EIKO OJALA

the past three months. And the rates are especially high in middle age: Americans in their fifties, unlike their counterparts in other countries, have higher rates of chronic pain than those in their seventies and eighties.

Case's husband, Angus Deaton, is also an economist at Princeton. In 2013, he published a sweeping economic history, "The Great Escape," which traced the way people had become healthier and wealthier in the past couple of centuries, though at a cost to economic equality. During his research, he'd noticed that people's happiness was largely disconnected from this story. As wealth rose, so did health and quality of life; happiness did not necessarily follow. He was struck, then, when his wife told him that pain rates had not declined, either.

Was there a link? They combed through survey data together and found that communities with higher rates of chronic pain also had higher rates of suicide. What's more, rates of both had risen markedly for middle-aged, non-Hispanic white Americans—but not for black or Hispanic Americans. And the data grew only more curious and concerning the further they looked. As Case and Deaton recount in their new book, "Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism" (Princeton), they dug deeper into national vital statistics and compared rates of suicide with those of other causes of mortality. "To our astonishment, it was not only suicide that was rising among middle-aged whites; it was *all* deaths," they write.

This was nearly unfathomable. Outside of wars or pandemics, death rates for large populations across the world have been consistently falling for decades. Yet working-age white men and women without college degrees were dying from suicide, drug overdoses, and alcohol-related liver disease at such rates that, for three consecutive years, life expectancy for the U.S. population as a whole had fallen. "The only precedent is a century ago, from 1915 through 1918, during the First World War and the influenza epidemic that followed it," Case and Deaton write. Between 1999 and 2017, more than six hundred thousand extra deaths—deaths in excess of the demographically predicted number—occurred just among people aged forty-five to fifty-four. Case and Deaton first wrote about the rise in deaths from suicide and self-poisoning—what they came to call "deaths of despair"—in a 2015 paper. The editors at *JAMA* and *The New England Journal of Medicine*, the two most prominent medical journals, somehow missed the paper's significance and rejected it without even a formal review; it was eventually published in a more technical journal, the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, in November of that year. A few weeks before it appeared, Deaton was named the winner of the Nobel Prize in Economics, for his earlier work in development economics. But he considered this new paper to be as important as anything he'd done in his life. Sure enough, when the paper came out it was discussed on television, talk radio, and social media, drawing the sort of public response that seldom greets economic research. It had put numbers on a long-simmering but inchoate sense among many people that something had gone profoundly wrong with the American Dream.

But what, exactly? Why was this happening here and not elsewhere? Case and Deaton's original paper offered no explanation, but their new book does. And their explanation begins by dismantling several others.

Was the source of the problem America's all-too-ready supply of prescription opioids? For decades, drug companies notoriously played down their addictive properties, and we physicians, to our lasting shame, gave out the drugs like lollipops. Looking back, I am aghast at the glib reassurance I gave patients who hesitated about taking oxycodone after surgery. "Don't worry," I'd say. "Addiction is unusual after surgery." But it wasn't, and I should have known. Studies revealed that three to eight per cent of surgery patients who took narcotics for the first time after brief hospital stays were still taking the drugs as much as twelve months later. Abuse became widespread in the early years of this century. After regulations tightened the legal supply of opioids, users turned to other sources. About a million Americans now use heroin daily or near-daily. Many others use illicitly obtained synthetic opioids like fentanyl.

Yet white Americans with bachelor's degrees have accounted for only about nine per cent of overdose deaths in the past quarter century. Such deaths are even rarer among black Americans. As Case and Deaton note, most people who abuse or become addicted to opioids continue to lead functional lives and many eventually escape their dependence. The oversupply of opioids did not create the conditions for despair. Instead, it appears, the oversupply fed upon a white working class already adrift. And, although opioid deaths plateaued, at least temporarily, in 2018, suicides and alcohol-related deaths continue upward.

Could deaths of despair be related

"I'm part human, part fish, and about ten per cent microplastics."

to the rising incidence of obesity? Obesity is known to increase chronic illness and joint pain, and its regional and demographic patterns track with deaths of despair. But Case and Deaton report that we're seeing the same troubling health trends "among the underweight, normal weight, overweight, and obese."

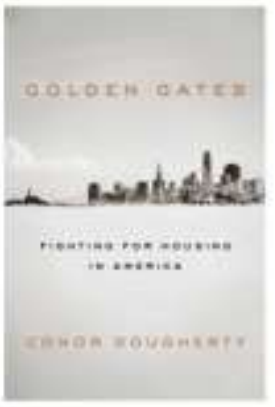
Is the problem poverty? Death rates for the white working class have seen no decline for nearly three decades, even as poverty rates fell during the nineteen-nineties, rose during the Great Recession, and fell again in the years afterward. Overdose deaths are most common in high-poverty Appalachia *and* along the low-poverty Eastern Seaboard, in places such as Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Delaware, and Connecticut. Meanwhile, some high-poverty states, such as Arkansas and Mississippi, have been less affected. Black and Hispanic populations are poorer but less affected, too.

How about income inequality? Case and Deaton have found that patterns of inequality, like patterns of poverty, simply don't match the patterns of mortality by race or region. California and New York, for instance, have among the highest inequality levels in the country and the lowest mortality rates.

A consistently strong economic correlate, by contrast, is the percentage of a local population that is employed. The numbers have undergone a long decline nationally. In the late nineteen-sixties, Case and Deaton note, all but five per cent of men of prime working age, from twenty-five to fifty-four, had jobs; by 2010, twenty per cent did not. In 2018, well into the recovery from the Great Recession, fourteen per cent were still not at work. Of that fourteen per cent, only a fifth reported that they were looking for work and were therefore counted in official statistics as "unemployed." The rest were not in the labor force. What Case and Deaton have found is that the places with a smaller fraction of the working-age population in jobs are places with higher rates of deaths of despair—and that this holds true even when you look at rates of suicide, drug overdoses, and alcohol-related liver disease separately. They all go up where joblessness does.

Conservatives tend to offer cultural explanations. You see this in J. D. Vance's

BRIEFLY NOTED



Golden Gates, *by Conor Dougherty (Penguin Press)*. Time and again, in this sweeping account of San Francisco's housing crisis, warring constituencies—tenants, techies, homeowners, builders, and activists—talk past one another, often with loudspeakers. One woman suggests that the groups instead attend their opponents' meetings: "Just show up, shut up, and sit there for half a year, listening." To Dougherty, such calls for empathy seem to offer hope both for Bay Area residents being priced out and for city officials facing resistance to building more housing. Although his book focusses on the zoning laws and economic distortions that created the shortage in the first place, at its core lies a subtle appeal against tribalism.

These Fevered Days, *by Martha Ackmann (Norton)*. The Emily Dickinson who emerges in this vivid, affectionate chronicle is a complex and warm-blooded individual—as curious, defiant of convention, and passionate in life as in her poems. Ackmann selects ten transformative junctures, portraying the poet as a sociable, self-assured teen-ager; as a student struggling with religious faith; as a prolific artist building a body of work and even beginning to publish. Despite Dickinson's legendary penchant for solitude, Ackmann sees the intensity of her relationship with the world—a world devastated by the Civil War but illuminated for her by correspondence with mentors and friends—as the ultimate sustenance of her poetry.

The Resisters, *by Gish Jen (Knopf)*. In this dystopian work of speculative fiction, a young girl named Gwen plays on the coed baseball team of AutoAmerica as it competes against ChinRussia at the Olympics. She has grown up in an authoritarian society divided between the Netted, who are privileged and fair-skinned, and the Surplus, who live in swamps or on water. Her talent at sports offers her a chance to join the Netted class. The novel is narrated by her father, who wants to see his "daughter, in all her giftedness and idiosyncratic humanity, bloom." As the family struggles in a fractured society, the "hallowed meaning" of baseball "in our American dreams" becomes pivotal: "Was this not the level playing field we envisioned?"

Romance in Marseille, *by Claude McKay (Penguin Classics)*. A noted figure of the Harlem Renaissance, McKay had an itinerant career—travelling widely in Europe and North Africa, and eventually forsaking the Marxism of his early years for Catholicism. This vibrant satire, begun in 1929, later abandoned, and now published for the first time, follows a West African stowaway on a boat from Marseille to New York. Discovered by the crew and shut in a freezing room, he loses both legs to frostbite, but, in a twist based on real cases, wins a large settlement from the shipping company and is able to return to Marseille a rich man. Encompassing a huge diversity of perspectives—including memorable evocations of Marseille's black Marxist scene and of its queer subculture—the novel remains radical in its clear-eyed assessment of racism and unsentimental depiction of disability.

"Hillbilly Elegy" and Charles Murray's "Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960-2010," not to mention a raft of state initiatives that would impose work requirements on Medicaid recipients. People are taking the lazy way out of responsibilities, the argument goes, and so they choose alcohol, drugs, and welfare and disability checks over a commitment to hard work, family, and community. And now they are paying the price for their hedonism and decadence—with addiction, emptiness, and suicide.

Yet, if the main problem were that a large group of people were withdrawing from the workforce by choice, wages should have risen in parallel. Employers should have been pulling out the stops to lure people back to work. But they haven't. Wages have stayed flat for years.

So what does explain the rise of deaths of despair among white Americans without college degrees? Case and Deaton argue that the problem arises from the cumulative effect of a long economic stagnation and the way we as a nation have dealt with it. For the first few decades after the Second World War, per-capita U.S. economic growth averaged between two and three per cent a year. In the nineties, however, it dipped below two per cent. In the early two-thousands, it was less than one per cent. This past decade, it remained below 1.5 per cent.

Different populations have experienced this slowdown very differently. The earnings advantage for those with college degrees soared. Anti-discrimination measures improved earnings and job prospects for black and Hispanic Americans. Though their earnings still lag behind those of the white working class, life for this generation of people of color is better than it was for the last.

Not so for whites without a college education. Among the men, median wages have not only flattened; they have declined since 1979. The work that the less educated can find isn't as stable: hours are more uncertain, and job duration is shorter. Employment is more likely to take the form of gig work, temporary contracting, or day labor, and is less likely to come with benefits like health insurance.

Among advanced economies, this deterioration in pay and job stability is unique to the United States. In the past four decades, Americans without bachelor's degrees—the majority of the working-age population—have seen themselves become ever less valued in our economy. Their effort and experience provide smaller rewards than before, and they encounter longer periods between employment. It should come as no surprise that fewer continue to seek employment, and that more succumb to despair.

The problem isn't that people are not the way they used to be. It's that the economy and the structure of work are not the way they used to be. This has had devastating effects on the family and on community life. In 1980, rates of marriage by middle age were about eighty per cent for white people with and without bachelor's degrees alike. As the economic prospects of those two groups have diverged, however, so have their marriage prospects. Today, about seventy-five per cent of college graduates are married by age forty-five, but only sixty per cent of non-college graduates are. Nonmarital childbearing has reached forty per cent among less educated white women. Parents without bachelor's degrees are also now dramatically less likely to have a stable partner for rearing and financially supporting their children.

Religious institutions previously played a vital role in connecting people to a community. But the number of Americans who attend religious services has declined markedly over the past half century, falling to just one-third of the general population today. (The rate is lower still among non-college graduates.) Union membership has declined even more precipitously. Case and Deaton see a picture of steady economic and social breakdown, amid over-all prosperity. Physicians like me attend to the individual circumstances of illness and mortality. We see the seeds of suicide in pain, depression, or addiction, perhaps germinated by a life event, such as a breakup, a financial crisis, or a new health problem. But climate—the amount of social and economic instability not only in your life but also in your family and community—matters, too. Émile Durkheim pointed out more than a century ago that despair and then suicide result when people's material and social circumstances fall below their expectations. The connection appears to be just as powerful for other forms of self-harm, such as drug and alcohol abuse.

Yet why has the steep rise in deaths of despair been so uniquely American? Case and Deaton identify a few factors. The United States has provided unusually casual access to means of death. The availability of opioids has indeed played a role, and the same goes for firearms (involved in more than half of suicides); we all but load the weapons of self-destruction for people in misery. The U.S. has also embraced automation and globalization with greater alacrity and fewer restrictions than other countries have. Displaced workers here get relatively little in the way of protection and support. And we've enabled capital to take a larger share of the economic gains. "Economists long thought that the ratio of wages to profits was an immutable constant, about two to one," Case and Deaton point out. But since 1970, they find, it has declined significantly.

A more unexpected culprit identified by Case and Deaton is our complicated and costly health-care system. There is, to be sure, a strong correlation between lack of health coverage and increased risk of suicide (not to mention over-all mortality), but the problem doesn't end with the plight of the uninsured. The focus of Case and Deaton's indictment is on the fact that America's health-care system is peculiarly reliant on employer-provided insurance.

As they show, the premiums that employers pay amount to a perverse tax on hiring lower-skilled workers. According to the Kaiser Family Foundation, in 2019 the average family policy cost twenty-one thousand dollars, of which employers typically paid seventy per cent. "For a well-paid employee earning a salary of $150,000, the average family policy adds less than 10 percent to the cost of employing the worker," Case and Deaton write. "For a low-wage worker on half the median wage, it is 60 per-

cent." Even as workers' wages have stagnated or declined, then, the cost to their employers has risen sharply. One recent study shows that, between 1970 and 2016, the earnings that laborers received fell twenty-one per cent. But their total compensation, taken to include the cost of their benefits (in particular, health care), rose sixty-eight per cent. Increases in health-care costs have devoured take-home pay for those below the median income. At the same time, the system practically begs employers to reduce the number of less skilled workers they hire, by outsourcing or automating their positions. In Case and Deaton's analysis, this makes American health care itself a prime cause of our rising death rates.

It also means that, in order to revive the American Dream for people without college degrees, we must change the way we pay for health care. Instead of preserving a system that discourages employers from hiring, retaining, and developing workers without bachelor's degrees, we need to make health-care payments proportional to wages—as with tax-based systems like Medicare. Democrats are split over whether our health care should involve a single payer or multiple insurers. But that's not the crucial issue. In other advanced economies, people pay for health care through wage-based taxes. In some countries, such as Germany and Switzerland, the money pays for non-government insurance; elsewhere, the money pays for Medicare-like government insurance. Both strategies work. Neither undermines the employment prospects of the working class.

So far, the American approach to the rise in white working-class mortality has been to pour resources into addiction-treatment centers and suicide-prevention programs. Yet the rates of suicide and addiction remain sky-high. It's as if we're using pressure dressings on a bullet wound to the chest instead of getting at the source of the bleeding. Meanwhile, people whose life prospects have deteriorated respond, publicly, with anger (sometimes cynically inflamed) toward nonwhites and immigrants, whose prospects, though worse than their white counterparts', may have improved compared with those of their forebears. But Case and Deaton want us to recognize that the more widespread response is a sense of hopelessness and helplessness. And here culture does play a role.

"You fermented everything?"

• •

When it comes to people whose lives aren't going well, American culture is a harsh judge: if you can't find enough work, if your wages are too low, if you can't be counted on to support a family, if you don't have a promising future, then there must be something wrong with you. When people discover that they can numb negative feelings with alcohol or drugs, only to find that addiction has made them even more powerless, it seems to confirm that they are to blame. We Americans are reluctant to acknowledge that our economy serves the educated classes and penalizes the rest. But that's exactly the situation, and "Deaths of Despair" shows how the immiseration of the less educated has resulted in the loss of hundreds of thousands of lives, even as the economy has thrived and the stock market has soared. To adapt the old Bill Clinton campaign motto, it's the unfair economy, stupid.

"We are not against capitalism," Case and Deaton write. "We believe in the power of competition and of free markets." But capitalism, having failed America's less educated workers for decades, must change, as it has in the past. "There have been previous periods when capitalism failed most people, as the Industrial Revolution got under way at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and again after the Great Depression," they write. "But the beast was tamed, not slain."

Are we capable of again taming the beast? In earlier eras, reform involved child-labor laws, worker-safety protections, overtime requirements, social security, a minimum wage. Today, the battles are over an employer-based system for financing health care, corporate governance that puts shareholders' interests ahead of workers', tax plans that benefit capital holders over wage earners. The dispiriting politics of stasis and scapegoating can prevail for a very long time, even as the damage comes into clearer view. We are better at addressing fast-moving crises than slow-building ones. It wouldn't be surprising, then, if we simply absorbed current conditions as the new normal. We are good at muddling along.

But unexpected things happen, as the coronavirus pandemic demonstrates. One reality in particular will surely fester. Because economic policy is inseparable from health-care policy, the unfairness of the health system is inseparable from the unfairness of the economy—an unfairness measured not only in dollars but in deaths. The blighted prospects of the less educated are a public-health crisis, and, as the number of victims mounts, it will be harder to ignore. ♦

THE THEATRE

DEEP DIVE

"Endlings" questions the legitimacy of storytelling onstage.

BY ALEXANDRA SCHWARTZ

The theatre is full of interruption these days. The lights go down, the play begins, and then, suddenly, stops. Some other action takes over, which, more often than not, critiques what we've just watched and—rubes that we are—maybe even enjoyed. The effect, sometimes profoundly, productively destabilizing, can also be glibly "gotcha," as the audience finds itself mocked for its willingness to suspend disbelief. But lately I've heard a note of anxiety sounding beneath all the restless form-shifting, one that suggests playwrights' ambivalence about the idea of "storytelling"—that poor, overworked word, corporately co-opted to within an inch of its life. Is it all right to make things up? the playwrights seem to be asking. Is it ethical? Is it interesting? And who am I to be doing it?

"Endlings," Celine Song's latest play, is really two works spliced roughly together: a traditional play that seeks to depict people's lives, and a metafictional examination of the playwright's own motivations, which flirts with honesty before traipsing down a solipsistic path of no return. (The play, directed by Sammi Cannold, opened at New York Theatre Workshop on March 9th; last week, the theatre, like others around New York, announced that it is suspending its programming for the next month, in response to COVID-19.) The action begins on the beach of Korea's Man-Jae island. Standing before a landscape as stark as a child's drawing—blue sea, black rocks, pale sand—are three old women in orange wetsuits. They are haenyeo: female Korean divers who swim to the ocean floor, without the luxury of oxygen tanks, to gather seafood to sell. They dive every day, no matter the weather, and their work lasts a lifetime. Han Sol (Wai Ching Ho), a sanguine, grandmotherly woman whose great pleasure is watching television, is in her nineties; Go Min (the wonderful Emily Kuroda), salty-mouthed and tough, is in her eighties; Sook Ja (Jo Yang), the glamorous one—she likes to apply lipstick before a dive—is the seventysomething baby. Like a doomed trio of Beckett characters, they are alone on the beach, waiting—for a fisherman, whom we never see, to come and take their harvest to the mainland, and also, ultimately, for death. Song's conceit is that the three women are the last of their kind; their profession will die when they do. "When they were young they would ask me to teach them how to dive into the ocean with a rusty knife," Go Min says, of her children, who left the island long ago. "And I would smack them on the head."

As the haenyeo go about their business (the Basil Twist-like set, in which hidden windows open to reveal the women flippering around in a surrealist aquarium populated with puppets of clams and one very large turtle, is by Jason Sherwood), a bright female voice comes over the speaker system. She sounds like an announcer on some Discovery Channel reality show, overlaying the action with a string of diving factoids and cheesy biographical tidbits. Is this a dig at the way Han Sol's beloved television packages the mysterious world for facile consumption? The haenyeo, who can hear the announcer, seem to be participating, grudgingly or not, in her commodification of their lives, though to what end it's hard to say.

Soon we meet the woman behind the voice: Ha Young (Jiehae Park), a stand-in for the playwright, who is identified in the script as a "Korean-Canadian Manhattanite in her late 20s." Speaking breathlessly, like someone on a coke spree or in the middle of a panic attack, she tells us the "story of my immigration," beginning with her grandmother's escape from northern Korea, in the forties, and continuing to her mother's journey, with her,

Celine Song's play is really two works spliced roughly together.

ILLUSTRATION BY NADIA HAFID

to the West, some fifty years later. Ha Young seems personally aggrieved about the crimes that history has committed against her family, but she also uses irony to distance herself from strong feeling even as she confides in us. "Wasn't that *so* cool?" she says, after playing a clip of real haenyeo singing a haunting song about a magical island where their dead husbands wait for them. "Aren't you excited to tell your friends? How you saw a weird play about weird old diving women from Korea?"

What's behind that accusatory sarcasm? After a brief return to the plot of the play—disaster befalls Sook Ja, plunging Han Sol and Go Min into mournful melancholy—we find out. Stagehands whisk away the lovely seaside set, leaving us in a drab Manhattan apartment with Ha Young and a man (Miles G. Jackson), who wears a placard identifying him as her "WHITE HUSBAND (also a playwright)." She's just shown him the script for the play that we've been watching, and although he's blandly encouraging, he doesn't seem to like it much. Ha Young wants him to be jealous, because isn't your partner's creative envy confirmation that you've made something truly worthwhile? (No, but this sophomoric marriage isn't a subject the play is interested in exploring.) "Me being jealous of this play would mean being jealous of who you are, which I'm not," White Husband tells her. He's getting at something real, and in a rush Ha Young tells him what it is:

> I decided to write this play because I was trapped
> I first told some white people about haenyeos and how amazing they are
> And then they were like "oh my god that's amazing you have to write a play about them"
> And I was like "you think?"
> And they were like "yes definitely you should definitely write it"
> And I was like "maybe I will"
> And some of them even supported me writing it by giving me free food and vacation
> Some of them gave me money so that I could keep working on it
> Some of them just leaned in
> Looked at me lustfully
> Looked at me hungrily
> And said "tell me more about these women"

The appearance of White Husband, a stale joke in place of a character, had depressed me, but this monologue (it's spoken fluidly, despite being versified on the page) made me sit up again. Was Song prepared to call bullshit on the well-meaning liberal captains of the theatre industry, who have, in recent years, tried to make up for the relative homogeneity of their programming by fetishistically encouraging young artists to exploit their "exotic" identities for the gratification of a sympathetic but persistently white audience? "I just wanted to tell the story of remarkable Asian lives," Ha Young says, but White Husband knows better: this is marketing speak, not the way an artist truly thinks.

The moment feels exciting and a little dangerous, as when anyone tells a discomfiting truth. But "Endlings" soon cracks under a crisis of confidence. By telling us that she was "bribed by white people's attention" to write about the haenyeo, Ha Young effectively labels the promising play we've been watching as the work of an identity-peddling sellout. But, instead of showing us what she'd rather write, she lampoons the kind of play she presumes we'd rather see. What follows is a fatally broad, passé pastiche of the theatre as a place for white men to cry about their problems: a group of white male actors (Matt DaSilva, Mark Mauriello, Keith Michael Pinault, and Andy Talen) mime a performance of a "white play" at a "white theatre," saying things like "Oh my white god hear my white prayer." These lines get easy laughs, but I doubt even Song believes them. Earlier, Ha Young said that when she was in graduate school she made a photo collage of her writer heroes: "I called it my 'wall of boyfriends' and every single person on it was a white man." Park delivers the line pointedly, but it turns out that Ha Young's heroes were Samuel Beckett, Edward Albee, and Shakespeare—white men, all, but hardly ones who used the theatre to generically flatter their own narrow egos. (And why not explore the absence of women and playwrights of color from her crush list?)

It's strange to critique a white-male-centric point of view by pushing women off the stage; when the haenyeo finally return, for a coda of sorts, it does little to make up for the fact that their story has been sacrificed for a sermon. The uncomfortable impression is of a failure of imagination on Song's part, a desire to blame the audience for not wanting to hear what she herself doesn't yet know how to say. ♦

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MUSICAL EVENTS

PHANTOM VESSEL

"The Flying Dutchman" and "Agrippina," at the Met.

BY ALEX ROSS

Evgeny Nikitin, as the Dutchman, and Anja Kampe, as Senta.

When, at the beginning of March, the powerfully political Russian conductor Valery Gergiev led the première of a new production of Wagner's "The Flying Dutchman" at the Metropolitan Opera, a mild-mannered group of protesters gathered outside to object to his presence. "GERGIEV SIGNED LETTER BACKING THE ANNEXATION OF CRIMEA AND WAR IN UKRAINE" read one sign. It was something of an understatement. Gergiev, the longtime chief of the Mariinsky Theatre, in St. Petersburg, has close ties to Vladimir Putin, and has repeatedly participated in high-profile propaganda efforts on behalf of the current Russian regime, including making appearances in Crimea and in Syria. In light of the regime's well-documented involvement in domestic repression, assassination plots, efforts to sabotage Western democracies, and, not least, interference in American elections, Gergiev's relationships with institutions like the Met deserve scrutiny.

Inside the house, other objections came to mind. When Gergiev first emerged on the international scene, in the nineties, he often elicited performances of sensational force. In recent years, his work has deteriorated, perhaps because of an overfull schedule, and his "Dutchman" reached a new low, at least in my experience. It seldom rose above the level of the acceptable, and at several moments it fell below the standard of a top-rank opera house. Tempos were sludgy, entries were ragged, the emotional temperature was lukewarm, nothing sparked. Dozens of conductors could have achieved superior results. What is gained by hiring Gergiev? Whatever the rationale is, it can no longer be musical.

The production, which closed prematurely because of the coronavirus shutdown, arrived with problems of its own. Expectations ran high because François Girard, the director, had triumphed at the Met with "Parsifal," in 2013. That staging's stormy skies, wasted landscapes, and lakes of blood showed visual invention of a high order, and the final tableau of redemption for Kundry had an air of authentic grace. Girard appeared set to become the Met's leading director of Wagner—to be sure, a title of no great weight, given the company's near-total absence from the annals of significant Wagner interpretation.

The tale of the ghostly Dutchman, cursed to wander the seas until a woman saves him, is part of a long lineage that includes everything from "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" to "Pirates of the Caribbean." Girard's intention, according to an interview he gave to the *Times*, was to detach the old legend from its supernatural trappings and transplant it to a more abstract, mystical realm. In the libretto, the Dutchman lands in Norway after a storm; impresses a local captain, Daland, with his wealth; and wins the hand of Daland's daughter, Senta. Girard, wishing to mute the apparent misogyny of the plot, made the Dutchman's gold an array of glowing crystals, apparently of cosmic significance. The change did little to redeem the transaction, and, in any case, it undersold Wagner's powers of critique: the mercenary trading of women for gold is a recurring theme of his work, and he uses it to depict societal corruption, notably in the "Ring" cycle.

There are, of course, many different ways to stage "Dutchman": classic productions by Joachim Herz and by Harry Kupfer framed the story as Senta's dream. Girard, though, jettisoned Romantic conventions only to land in a minimalist limbo. The set design, by John Macfarlane, was dominated by the menacing prow of a ship—oddly, not the Dutchman's but Daland's. The opera's one surefire dramatic coup, the entry of the Dutchman's vessel, passed by almost

ILLUSTRATION BY PIETER VAN EENOGE

unnoticed, with a few Spielbergian cloud formations and flickering lights. Act II was given over to a kind of ballet of intertwining ropes, which accompanied the Spinning Chorus; it was arresting at first, then became labored. In Act III, the bloodcurdling chorus of the Dutchman's spectral crew lacked a persuasive visual component. Throughout, motifs from Girard's "Parsifal" reappeared, including barren terrain and scudding wrack, yet they amounted mainly to gloomy atmosphere.

The star bass-baritone Bryn Terfel was to have sung the title role, but in January he fractured his ankle and withdrew. His replacement, Evgeny Nikitin, is a favorite collaborator of Gergiev's, and, more to the point, sang strongly as the evil sorcerer Klingsor in Girard's "Parsifal." The cutting snarl of Nikitin's tone in the middle and upper registers conveyed the Dutchman's menace; the character's melancholy ardor went missing. The veteran German soprano Anja Kampe blazed intermittently in the role of Senta; although some top notes went astray, her Act II ballad was cannily plotted and urgently delivered. Franz-Josef Selig was a sturdy, stolid Daland. The young tenor Sergey Skorokhodov gave an attractive Italianate ping to the role of Senta's suitor Erik. David Portillo was similarly luminous as the Steersman. The men of the Met chorus let out a potent nautical roar, even though they were often left to fend for themselves as Gergiev waved vaguely and gazed down at his score.

The following night, the mood at the Met brightened considerably. A well-travelled David McVicar production of "Agrippina," Handel's glorious satire of Roman decadence, was receiving the penultimate performance of its run, and the cast had the loose, convivial spirit of a team that has been working together for weeks and is preparing to disband. A trio of devil-may-care female leads outdid one another in actorly extravagance. Joyce DiDonato, as Agrippina, the last wife of Emperor Claudius, clip-clopped to and fro in high heels, smirking conspiratorially. Kate Lindsey, as Agrippina's deranged son, Nero, spazzed out in a bad-boy style, burying her face in heaps of stage cocaine. Brenda Rae brought down the house when her character, the fast-learning ingénue Poppea, drunkenly tried to hide behind a flower arrangement at a bar.

This was, needless to say, a modern-dress update. McVicar had little trouble finding contemporary analogies; indeed, he might have tried a bit harder. Having Matthew Rose, as Claudius, wear a long red tie and wield a golf club, à la Donald Trump, felt cheap (and it also did a disservice to the emperor's legislative record). Other interpolations hit home. The countertenor Nicholas Tamagna, as the snivelling politician Narciso, sang the aria "Volo pronto" while sitting next to Agrippina at a plush theatre. When the empress groped him during the da capo, he became audibly aroused, causing others to shush him. The sequence was a little comic masterpiece, deftly integrated with the music.

At the heart of the show was DiDonato, who pulled off yet another vocal-theatrical tour de force. She used her dizzyingly precise and flexible voice to capture myriad nuances of Agrippina's dubious character: insincere flattery, veiled contempt, sadistic flirtation, hidden fury. The last element deepens the characterization—Agrippina is as much a victim of a corrupt system as she is its master manipulator.

Lindsey and Rae may not rival DiDonato in vocal agility, but they crafted indelible portrayals all the same. The countertenor Iestyn Davies, as Ottone, made the most of the opera's more serious moments: his lament "Voi che udite" brought the lunacy to a haunting halt. Harry Bicket, in the pit, elicited idiomatic playing throughout; he also made a cute onstage cameo, playing harpsichord continuo with the mannerisms of a lounge pianist.

Truth be told, this "Agrippina" was madcap to a fault, undercutting the leads with an excess of focus-stealing poses and pratfalls. Still, it made a great old score come alive, and its portrait of a society ruled by cynicism and venality felt pertinent. The delicious irony that hangs over the opera's pseudo-happy ending is that Agrippina is destined to be murdered by the same son whom she schemes to place on the throne. In Vincenzo Grimani's brilliant libretto, her final words are "Now that Nero reigns, I can die happy." DiDonato broke into a sob when she sang the line: her character glimpses what fate has in store. ♦

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THE CURRENT CINEMA

BINDINGS

"The Truth" and "The Booksellers."

BY ANTHONY LANE

The trees are in their autumn beauty, at the start of "The Truth," and so is Catherine Deneuve. She plays a famous French actress named Fabienne—snippy, chic, and radiating effortless hauteur. Her dedication to her art is unyielding. "I prefer to have been a bad mother, a bad friend, and a good actress," she says. "You may not forgive me, but the public does." Ever serene, she doesn't deny the collateral damage that her career may have caused. She just doesn't care.

Any resemblance to living persons is, of course, entirely coincidental. Nonetheless, the role of Fabienne is a comically good fit for Deneuve, since it allows her both to fulfill and, ever so lightly, to kid the dominant status that she enjoys in her native land, and in the saga of cinema. You don't work, as she has done, for Truffaut, Buñuel, Jacques Demy, Leos Carax, and François Ozon—and, let us not forget, alongside Burt Reynolds in Robert Aldrich's "Hustle" (1975)—without acquiring the crown and scepter, as it were, of a grande dame. Remember Arnaud Desplechin's "Kings and Queen" (2004), in which Deneuve plays a psychiatrist. "Do you know you're very beautiful?" a patient asks her. "Yes, I've been told, thank you," she replies.

At the helm of "The Truth" is the Japanese director Hirokazu Kore-eda, and it marks his first foray into French terrain. The setting is a semi-pastoral patch of Paris, where Fabienne resides in a stately mansion; we see her stroll through its garden in silvery pajamas, rehearsing her lines. Also taking the air is a pet tortoise, who shares a name with Fabienne's ex-husband. (So much for *that* marriage.) Maintaining the animal motif, she wears a leopard-print coat to walk her dog beside the walls of a nearby prison—a deliberate touch of incongruity, halfway to a dream. Sometimes it takes an outsider's eye to spot such juxtapositions.

Juliette Binoche and Catherine Deneuve star in Hirokazu Kore-eda's film.

Fabienne is concluding an interview, at home, when guests arrive, fresh off the plane from New York. "It's nothing. My daughter and her little family," she explains. That "nothing" freezes the blood. Her daughter is Lumir (Juliette Binoche), a screenwriter, married to a not very successful American actor, Hank (Ethan Hawke), and they've come with their young daughter, Charlotte (Clémentine Grenier), who inquires of her grandmother, "Do you really have magical powers?" I wouldn't bet against it. One reason for the visit is the imminent publication of Fabienne's memoirs, which bear the very unwise title of "The Truth," and which, as far as Lumir is concerned, are a pack of shiny lies. One example: her mother claims that she used to pick Lumir up from school. Yeah, right.

You can sense, soon enough, how "The Truth" is likely to proceed. Though trouble may be brewing between Fabienne and Lumir, on the other side of it lies calm. Mother-daughter movies constitute a mini-genre, headed by "Mildred Pierce" (1945), but the melodramatic drive of that film, skirting hysteria, is at a far remove from Kore-eda's approach. Elliptical to a fault, he is concerned with fears and suspicions that are muted or sidelined, often over many years, rather than being poured forth. Think of the two sets of parents in "Like Father, Like Son" (2013), who discover that their respective sons were accidentally switched at birth. Nothing so drastic occurs in the latest film, yet old wounds wait to be reopened, as when Fabienne admits to Lumir that, contrary to earlier reports, she did once go to see her daughter act, onstage, in "The Wizard of Oz." "You were lousy," she adds. Every parent knows the value of a white lie, sweetly timed, but not Fabienne. She tells the truth as if unsheathing a knife.

Why, then, does this supple story begin to falter? Maybe because it comes across, by Kore-eda's standard, as something of a package, with its arguments neatly folded and wrapped. Fabienne, for instance, just happens to be shooting a sci-fi movie, which is all about a mother who doesn't age and a daughter who does—"You stay young and I keep getting older," the daughter declares. The scene that follows is touchingly done, yet we know that its main purpose is to bolster the theme of generational anxiety. I can't help wishing that Fabienne were starring in a glossy thriller, or a wisp of a comedy, that bore no relation whatever to problems at home.

Then, there is a weird request of Fabienne's. She proposes that Lumir, being a writer, should help her by composing lines of dialogue, to be used in a speech

ILLUSTRATION BY SONIA PULIDO

of apology addressed to a disgruntled employee. Again, you can feel the film coiling in upon itself; it's almost as if Kore-eda, whose films hitherto have been locked into Japanese mores and habitations, doesn't yet trust himself to dramatize the broad expanses of French society, and therefore trains his gaze inward, upon the woes of this one family. Note also that it's a standard-issue family, complete with parents and kids, whereas the adults in Kore-eda's previous movie, the wonderful "Shoplifters" (2018), shivered with uncertainty; their dwelling place was little better than a shack, and a rescued runaway was treated like a daughter. No such worries for Fabienne and her clan. Charlotte is safe, legitimate, and adored, and the cushion of wealth could not be plumper.

Despite these shortfalls, there's much to relish here. To play a guy like Hank, who must resign himself to being second or fourth fiddle, is a tricky task, but Hawke pulls it off in the quiet style that he has made his own, and there's an easeful moment when Hank and the others (even Fabienne), emerging from a restaurant by night, slip into an impromptu dance as they mosey down the street. In the end, however, this is the Catherine Deneuve show, and I can already hear the meows of catty delight with which audiences will greet the scene where the topic of great actresses comes up. Many of them, it's pointed out, have had double initials: Greta Garbo, Danielle Darrieux, Anouk Aimée. How about Brigitte Bardot? somebody asks, and Fabienne answers with a moue. Not just any moue, either, but a supermoue—a whole cultural attitude distilled into a single *boffff*. And yet Fabienne, though frosty, is not impermeable, and in the final minutes, with the seasons changing and the leaves falling, she lifts her immaculate face to the winter light. Something stirs within her, even now, beneath the ice.

When a movie called "The Booksellers" comes along, you can't help pausing over the title. Might it be Mob slang? You can imagine a Martin Scorsese film in which "bookseller" means a guy in a dusty jacket, whose job is to pop other guys, smack in the flyleaf, leaving the cops badly foxed. As it is, "The Booksellers"—a new documentary, directed by D. W. Young—really *is* about people who sell books, though they are, in their way, as implacable as gangsters. Show them a copy of "Moby-Dick" in which Melville has doodled little cartoon whales, and they'll cut your throat to get it.

There's no narrative to the film. It's more of a social event: a congregation of the faithful, whom we first encounter at the New York International Antiquarian Book Fair, in the Park Avenue Armory. The dealers' mission, one declares, is to "inculcate neophytes into the wonder of the object of the book." (Translation: get the suckers hooked.) We glimpse one volume containing mammoth hair; another covered in human skin, with teeth embedded in the cover; and a librarian doll, "with Amazing push-button Shushing Action!" We meet the collector Justin Schiller, who was still in seventh grade when he lent some of his L. Frank Baum material to Columbia University, and the three graceful sisters who rule over the Argosy Book Store, on Fifty-ninth Street, having jointly inherited the throne from their father, Louis Cohen. If King Lear had gone into the book trade, he could have saved himself a world of grief.

Young confines most of his movie to New York, opting to travel backward in time rather than far afield on the map. We hear of A. S. W. Rosenbach, for instance, the portly Pope of book dealers, who, despite downing a bottle of whiskey a day, maintained a sharp eye for incontestable treasures. Few businesses attract a more loyal gang of monomaniacs, bound and tooled in eccentricity; Fran Lebowitz, interviewed in the film, remembers crabby old dealers "who were very irritated if you wanted to buy a book."

One should never try to tell a movie's fortune, but I suspect that "The Booksellers" will end up preaching to the choir—to those of us who are pathologically incapable of passing a used bookstore without entering. We *want* to be greeted by a complete set of Walter Scott's Waverley novels, so uncoveted that they might as well be glued to the shelf, and by the distinct air of cat that pervades even those premises where no cat has ever trod. Such holy shrines are now themselves a rarity, and Nancy Bass Wyden, co-owner of the Strand, has done the numbers. "In the nineteen-fifties, there were three hundred and sixty-eight bookstores in New York City," she tells us. "Today, I went and counted—there are seventy-nine." Do not be misled by the comic charm of this film. It's a ghost story, brooded over by the rustling wraiths of bookstores dead and gone. ♦

NEWYORKER.COM
Richard Brody blogs about movies.

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CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Drew Panckeri, must be received by Sunday, March 22nd. The finalists in the March 9th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the April 6th issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit contest.newyorker.com.

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST

"

"

THE FINALISTS

"They didn't specify which one, but your insurance will only cover half."
Rebecca Linde, New York City

"Use caution when pulling a wagon, a plow, or other machinery while you're on this medication."
Scott Muller, Montclair, N.J.

"Looks like you're already familiar with the side effects."
Madeline Wolfson, Brooklyn, N.Y.

THE WINNING CAPTION

"Harry, the whole point of leaving England was to blend in."
Deb Pecchia, Hyde Park, N.Y.

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